

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE THREE CITIES
TRILOGY: LOURDES,
VOLUME 3

ЭМИЛЬ ЗОЛЯ

**The Three Cities Trilogy:
Lourdes, Volume 3**

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Émile Zola

The Three Cities Trilogy: Lourdes, Volume 3

LOURDE THE THIRD DAY

I

BED AND BOARD

AT seven o'clock on the morning of that fine, bright, warm August Sunday, M. de Guersaint was already up and dressed in one of the two little rooms which he had fortunately been able to secure on the third floor of the Hotel of the Apparitions. He had gone to bed at eleven o'clock the night before and had awoke feeling quite fresh and gay. As soon as he was dressed he entered the adjoining room which Pierre occupied; but the young priest, who had not returned to the hotel until past one in the morning, with his blood heated by insomnia, had been unable to doze off until daybreak and was now still slumbering. His cassock flung across a chair, his other garments scattered here and there, testified to his great weariness and agitation of mind.

"Come, come, you lazybones!" cried M. de Guersaint gaily; "can't you hear the bells ringing?"

Pierre awoke with a start, quite surprised to find himself in that little hotel room into which the sunlight was streaming. All the joyous peals of the bells, the music of the chiming, happy town, moreover, came in through the window which he had left open.

"We shall never have time to get to the hospital before eight o'clock to fetch Marie," resumed M. de Guersaint, "for we must have some breakfast, eh?"

"Of course, make haste and order two cups of chocolate. I will get up at once, I sha'n't be long," replied Pierre.

In spite of the fatigue which had already stiffened his joints, he sprang out of bed as soon as he was alone, and made all haste with his toilet. However, he still had his head in the washing basin, ducking it in the fresh, cool water, when M. de Guersaint, who was unable to remain alone, came back again. "I've given the order," said he; "they will bring it up. Ah! what a curious place this hotel is! You have of course seen the landlord, Master Majeste, clad in white from head to foot and looking so dignified in his office. The place is crammed, it appears; they have never had so many people before. So it is no wonder that there should be such a fearful noise. I was wakened up three times during the night. People kept on talking in the room next to mine. And you, did you sleep well?"

"No, indeed," answered Pierre; "I was tired to death, but I couldn't close my eyes. No doubt it was the uproar you speak of that prevented me."

In his turn he then began to talk of the thin partitions, and the manner in which the house had been crammed with people until it seemed as though the floors and the walls would collapse with the strain. The place had been shaking all night long; every now and then people suddenly rushed along the passages, heavy footfalls resounded, gruff voices ascended nobody knew whence; without speaking of all the moaning and coughing, the frightful coughing which seemed to re-echo from every wall. Throughout the night people evidently came in and went out, got up and lay down again, paying no attention to time in the disorder in which they lived, amid shocks of passion which made them hurry to their devotional exercises as to pleasure parties.

"And Marie, how was she when you left her last night?" M. de Guersaint suddenly inquired.

"A great deal better," replied Pierre; "she had an attack of extreme discouragement, but all her courage and faith returned to her at last."

A pause followed; and then the girl's father resumed with his tranquil optimism: "Oh! I am not anxious. Things will go on all right, you'll see. For my own part, I am delighted. I had asked the Virgin to grant me her protection in my affairs – you know, my great invention of navigable balloons. Well, suppose I told you that she has already shown me her favour? Yes, indeed yesterday evening while I was talking with Abbe des Hermoises, he told me that at Toulouse he would no doubt be able to find a person to finance me – one of his friends, in fact, who is extremely wealthy and takes great interest in mechanics! And in this I at once saw the hand of God!" M. de Guersaint began laughing with his childish laugh, and then he added: "That Abbe des Hermoises is a charming man. I shall see this afternoon if there is any means of my accompanying him on an excursion to the Cirque de Gavarnie at small cost."

Pierre, who wished to pay everything, the hotel bill and all the rest, at once encouraged him in this idea. "Of course," said he, "you ought not to miss this opportunity to visit the mountains, since you have so great a wish to do so. Your daughter will be very happy to know that you are pleased."

Their talk, however, was now interrupted by a servant girl bringing the two cups of chocolate with a couple of rolls on a metal tray covered with a napkin. She left the door open as she entered the room, so that a glimpse was obtained of some portion of the passage. "Ah! they are already doing my neighbour's room!" exclaimed M. de Guersaint. "He is a married man, isn't he? His wife is with him?"

The servant looked astonished. "Oh, no," she replied, "he is quite alone!"

"Quite alone? Why, I heard people talking in his room this morning."

"You must be mistaken, monsieur," said the servant; "he has just gone out after giving orders that his room was to be tidied up at once." And then, while taking the cups of chocolate off the tray and placing them on the table, she continued: "Oh! he is a very respectable gentleman. Last year he was able to have one of the pavilions which Monsieur Majeste lets out to visitors, in the lane by the side of the hotel; but this year he applied too late and had to content himself with that room, which greatly worried him, for it isn't a large one, though there is a big cupboard in it. As he doesn't care to eat with everybody, he takes his meals there, and he orders good wine and the best of everything, I can tell you."

"That explains it all!" replied M. de Guersaint gaily; "he dined too well last night, and I must have heard him talking in his sleep."

Pierre had been listening somewhat inquisitively to all this chatter. "And on this side, my side," said he, "isn't there a gentleman with two ladies, and a little boy who walks about with a crutch?"

"Yes, Monsieur l'Abbe, I know them. The aunt, Madame Chaise, took one of the two rooms for herself; and Monsieur and Madame Vignerou with their son Gustave have had to content themselves with the other one. This is the second year they have come to Lourdes. They are very respectable people too."

Pierre nodded. During the night he had fancied he could recognise the voice of M. Vignerou, whom the heat doubtless had incommoded. However, the servant was now thoroughly started, and she began to enumerate the other persons whose rooms were reached by the same passage; on the left hand there was a priest, then a mother with three daughters, and then an old married couple; whilst on the right lodged another gentleman who was all alone, a young lady, too, who was unaccompanied, and then a family party which included five young children. The hotel was crowded to its garrets. The servants had had to give up their rooms the previous evening and lie in a heap in the washhouse. During the night, also, some camp bedsteads had even been set up on the landings; and one honourable ecclesiastic, for lack of other accommodation, had been obliged to sleep on a billiard-table.

When the girl had retired and the two men had drunk their chocolate, M. de Guersaint went back into his own room to wash his hands again, for he was very careful of his person; and Pierre,

who remained alone, felt attracted by the gay sunlight, and stepped for a moment on to the narrow balcony outside his window. Each of the third-floor rooms on this side of the hotel was provided with a similar balcony, having a carved-wood balustrade. However, the young priest's surprise was very great, for he had scarcely stepped outside when he suddenly saw a woman protrude her head over the balcony next to him – that of the room occupied by the gentleman whom M. de Guersaint and the servant had been speaking of.

And this woman he had recognised: it was Madame Volmar. There was no mistaking her long face with its delicate drawn features, its magnificent large eyes, those brasiers over which a veil, a dimming /moire/, seemed to pass at times. She gave a start of terror on perceiving him. And he, extremely ill at ease, grieved that he should have frightened her, made all haste to withdraw into his apartment. A sudden light had dawned upon him, and he now understood and could picture everything. So this was why she had not been seen at the hospital, where little Madame Desagneaux was always asking for her. Standing motionless, his heart upset, Pierre fell into a deep reverie, reflecting on the life led by this woman whom he knew, that torturing conjugal life in Paris between a fierce mother-in-law and an unworthy husband, and then those three days of complete liberty spent at Lourdes, that brief bonfire of passion to which she had hastened under the sacrilegious pretext of serving the divinity. Tears whose cause he could not even explain, tears that ascended from the very depths of his being, from his own voluntary chastity, welled into his eyes amidst the feeling of intense sorrow which came over him.

"Well, are you ready?" joyously called M. de Guersaint as he came back, with his grey jacket buttoned up and his hands gloved.

"Yes, yes, let us go," replied Pierre, turning aside and pretending to look for his hat so that he might wipe his eyes.

Then they went out, and on crossing the threshold heard on their left hand an unctuous voice which they recognised; it was that of M. Vigneron, who was loudly repeating the morning prayers. A moment afterwards came a meeting which interested them. They were walking down the passage when they were passed by a middle-aged, thick-set, sturdy-looking gentleman, wearing carefully trimmed whiskers. He bent his back and passed so rapidly that they were unable to distinguish his features, but they noticed that he was carrying a carefully made parcel. And immediately afterwards he slipped a key into the lock of the room adjoining M. de Guersaint's, and opening the door disappeared noiselessly, like a shadow.

M. de Guersaint had glanced round: "Ah! my neighbour," said he; "he has been to market and has brought back some delicacies, no doubt!"

Pierre pretended not to hear, for his companion was so light-minded that he did not care to trust him with a secret which was not his own. Besides, a feeling of uneasiness was returning to him, a kind of chaste terror at the thought that the world and the flesh were there taking their revenge, amidst all the mystical enthusiasm which he could feel around him.

They reached the hospital just as the patients were being brought out to be carried to the Grotto; and they found that Marie had slept well and was very gay. She kissed her father and scolded him when she learnt that he had not yet decided on his trip to Gavarnie. She should really be displeased with him, she said, if he did not go. Still with the same restful, smiling expression, she added that she did not expect to be cured that day; and then, assuming an air of mystery, she begged Pierre to obtain permission for her to spend the following night before the Grotto. This was a favour which all the sufferers ardently coveted, but which only a few favoured ones with difficulty secured. After protesting, anxious as he felt with regard to the effect which a night spent in the open air might have upon her health, the young priest, seeing how unhappy she had suddenly become, at last promised that he would make the application. Doubtless she imagined that she would only obtain a hearing from the Virgin when they were alone together in the slumbering peacefulness of the night. That morning, indeed, she felt so lost among the innumerable patients who were heaped together in front of the

Grotto, that already at ten o'clock she asked to be taken back to the hospital, complaining that the bright light tired her eyes. And when her father and the priest had again installed her in the Sainte-Honorine Ward, she gave them their liberty for the remainder of the day. "No, don't come to fetch me," she said, "I shall not go back to the Grotto this afternoon – it would be useless. But you will come for me this evening at nine o'clock, won't you, Pierre? It is agreed, you have given me your word."

He repeated that he would endeavour to secure the requisite permission, and that, if necessary, he would apply to Father Fourcade in person.

"Then, till this evening, darling," said M. de Guersaint, kissing his daughter. And he and Pierre went off together, leaving her lying on her bed, with an absorbed expression on her features, as her large, smiling eyes wandered away into space.

It was barely half-past ten when they got back to the Hotel of the Apparitions; but M. de Guersaint, whom the fine weather delighted, talked of having /dejeuner/ at once, so that he might the sooner start upon a ramble through Lourdes. First of all, however, he wished to go up to his room, and Pierre following him, they encountered quite a drama on their way. The door of the room occupied by the Vignerons was wide open, and little Gustave could be seen lying on the sofa which served as his bed. He was livid; a moment previously he had suddenly fainted, and this had made the father and mother imagine that the end had come. Madame Vigneron was crouching on a chair, still stupefied by her fright, whilst M. Vigneron rushed about the room, thrusting everything aside in order that he might prepare a glass of sugared-water, to which he added a few drops of some elixir. This draught, he exclaimed, would set the lad right again. But all the same, it was incomprehensible. The boy was still strong, and to think that he should have fainted like that, and have turned as white as a chicken! Speaking in this wise, M. Vigneron glanced at Madame Chaise, the aunt, who was standing in front of the sofa, looking in good health that morning; and his hands shook yet more violently at the covert idea that if that stupid attack had carried off his son, they would no longer have inherited the aunt's fortune. He was quite beside himself at this thought, and eagerly opening the boy's mouth he compelled him to swallow the entire contents of the glass. Then, however, when he heard Gustave sigh, and saw him open his eyes again, his fatherly good-nature reappeared, and he shed tears, and called the lad his dear little fellow. But on Madame Chaise drawing near to offer some assistance, Gustave repulsed her with a sudden gesture of hatred, as though he understood how this woman's money unconsciously perverted his parents, who, after all, were worthy folks. Greatly offended, the old lady turned on her heel, and seated herself in a corner, whilst the father and mother, at last freed from their anxiety, returned thanks to the Blessed Virgin for having preserved their darling, who smiled at them with his intelligent and infinitely sorrowful smile, knowing and understanding everything as he did, and no longer having any taste for life, although he was not fifteen.

"Can we be of any help to you?" asked Pierre in an obliging way.

"No, no, I thank you, gentlemen," replied M. Vigneron, coming for a moment into the passage. "But oh! we did have a fright! Think of it, an only son, who is so dear to us too."

All around them the approach of the /dejeuner/ hour was now throwing the house into commotion. Every door was banging, and the passages and the staircase resounded with the constant pitter-patter of feet. Three big girls passed by, raising a current of air with the sweep of their skirts. Some little children were crying in a neighbouring room. Then there were old people who seemed quite scared, and distracted priests who, forgetting their calling, caught up their cassocks with both hands, so that they might run the faster to the dining-room. From the top to the bottom of the house one could feel the floors shaking under the excessive weight of all the people who were packed inside the hotel.

"Oh, I hope that it is all over now, and that the Blessed Virgin will cure him," repeated M. Vigneron, before allowing his neighbours to retire. "We are going down-stairs, for I must confess that all this has made me feel faint. I need something to eat, I am terribly hungry."

When Pierre and M. de Guersaint at last left their rooms, and went down-stairs, they found to their annoyance that there was not the smallest table-corner vacant in the large dining-room. A most extraordinary mob had assembled there, and the few seats that were still unoccupied were reserved. A waiter informed them that the room never emptied between ten and one o'clock, such was the rush of appetite, sharpened by the keen mountain air. So they had to resign themselves to wait, requesting the waiter to warn them as soon as there should be a couple of vacant places. Then, scarcely knowing what to do with themselves, they went to walk about the hotel porch, whence there was a view of the street, along which the townsfolk, in their Sunday best, streamed without a pause.

All at once, however, the landlord of the Hotel of the Apparitions, Master Majeste in person, appeared before them, clad in white from head to foot; and with a great show of politeness he inquired if the gentlemen would like to wait in the drawing-room. He was a stout man of five-and-forty, and strove to bear the burden of his name in a right royal fashion. Bald and clean-shaven, with round blue eyes in a waxy face, displaying three superposed chins, he always deported himself with much dignity. He had come from Nevers with the Sisters who managed the orphan asylum, and was married to a dusky little woman, a native of Lourdes. In less than fifteen years they had made their hotel one of the most substantial and best patronised establishments in the town. Of recent times, moreover, they had started a business in religious articles, installed in a large shop on the left of the hotel porch and managed by a young niece under Madame Majeste's Supervision.

"You can wait in the drawing-room, gentlemen," again suggested the hotel-keeper whom Pierre's cassock rendered very attentive.

They replied, however, that they preferred to walk about and wait in the open air. And thereupon Majeste would not leave them, but deigned to chat with them for a moment as he was wont to do with those of his customers whom he desired to honour. The conversation turned at first on the procession which would take place that night and which promised to be a superb spectacle as the weather was so fine. There were more than fifty thousand strangers gathered together in Lourdes that day, for visitors had come in from all the neighbouring bathing stations. This explained the crush at the /table d'hôte/. Possibly the town would run short of bread as had been the case the previous year.

"You saw what a scramble there is," concluded Majeste, "we really don't know how to manage. It isn't my fault, I assure you, if you are kept waiting for a short time."

At this moment, however, a postman arrived with a large batch of newspapers and letters which he deposited on a table in the office. He had kept one letter in his hand and inquired of the landlord, "Have you a Madame Maze here?"

"Madame Maze, Madame Maze," repeated the hotel-keeper. "No, no, certainly not."

Pierre had heard both question and answer, and drawing near he exclaimed, "I know of a Madame Maze who must be lodging with the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Blue Sisters as people call them here, I think."

The postman thanked him for the information and went off, but a somewhat bitter smile had risen to Majeste's lips. "The Blue Sisters," he muttered, "ah! the Blue Sisters." Then, darting a side glance at Pierre's cassock, he stopped short, as though he feared that he might say too much. Yet his heart was overflowing; he would have greatly liked to ease his feelings, and this young priest from Paris, who looked so liberal-minded, could not be one of the "band" as he called all those who discharged functions at the Grotto and coined money out of Our Lady of Lourdes. Accordingly, little by little, he ventured to speak out.

"I am a good Christian, I assure you, Monsieur l'Abbe," said he. "In fact we are all good Christians here. And I am a regular worshipper and take the sacrament every Easter. But, really, I must say that members of a religious community ought not to keep hotels. No, no, it isn't right!"

And thereupon he vented all the spite of a tradesman in presence of what he considered to be disloyal competition. Ought not those Blue Sisters, those Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, to have confined themselves to their real functions, the manufacture of wafers for sacramental purposes,

and the repairing and washing of church linen? Instead of that, however, they had transformed their convent into a vast hostelry, where ladies who came to Lourdes unaccompanied found separate rooms, and were able to take their meals either in privacy or in a general dining-room. Everything was certainly very clean, very well organised and very inexpensive, thanks to the thousand advantages which the Sisters enjoyed; in fact, no hotel at Lourdes did so much business. "But all the same," continued Majeste, "I ask you if it is proper. To think of nuns selling victuals! Besides, I must tell you that the lady superior is really a clever woman, and as soon as she saw the stream of fortune rolling in, she wanted to keep it all for her own community and resolutely parted with the Fathers of the Grotto who wanted to lay their hands on it. Yes, Monsieur l'Abbe, she even went to Rome and gained her cause there, so that now she pockets all the money that her bills bring in. Think of it, nuns, yes nuns, /mon Dieu!/ letting furnished rooms and keeping a /table d'hote/!"

He raised his arms to heaven, he was stifling with envy and vexation.

"But as your house is crammed," Pierre gently objected, "as you no longer have either a bed or a plate at anybody's disposal, where would you put any additional visitors who might arrive here?"

Majeste at once began protesting. "Ah! Monsieur l'Abbe!" said he, "one can see very well that you don't know the place. It's quite true that there is work for all of us, and that nobody has reason to complain during the national pilgrimage. But that only lasts four or five days, and in ordinary times the custom we secure isn't nearly so great. For myself, thank Heaven, I am always satisfied. My house is well known, it occupies the same rank as the Hotel of the Grotto, where two landlords have already made their fortunes. But no matter, it is vexing to see those Blue Sisters taking all the cream of the custom, for instance the ladies of the /bourgeoisie/ who spend a fortnight and three weeks here at a stretch; and that, too, just in the quiet season, when there are not many people here. You understand, don't you? There are people of position who dislike uproar; they go by themselves to the Grotto, and pray there all day long, for days together, and pay good prices for their accommodation without any higgling."

Madame Majeste, whom Pierre and M. de Guersaint had not noticed leaning over an account-book in which she was adding up some figures, thereupon intervened in a shrill voice: "We had a customer like that, gentlemen, who stayed here for two months last year. She went to the Grotto, came back, went there again, took her meals, and went to bed. And never did we have a word of complaint from her; she was always smiling, as though to say that she found everything very nice. She paid her bill, too, without even looking at it. Ah! one regrets people of that kind."

Short, thin, very dark, and dressed in black, with a little white collar, Madame Majeste had risen to her feet; and she now began to solicit custom: "If you would like to buy a few little souvenirs of Lourdes before you leave, gentlemen, I hope that you will not forget us. We have a shop close by, where you will find an assortment of all the articles that are most in request. As a rule, the persons who stay here are kind enough not to deal elsewhere."

However, Majeste was again wagging his head, with the air of a good Christian saddened by the scandals of the time. "Certainly," said he, "I don't want to show any disrespect to the reverend Fathers, but it must in all truth be admitted that they are too greedy. You must have seen the shop which they have set up near the Grotto, that shop which is always crowded, and where tapers and articles of piety are sold. A bishop declared that it was shameful, and that the buyers and sellers ought to be driven out of the temple afresh. It is said, too, that the Fathers run that big shop yonder, just across the street, which supplies all the petty dealers in the town. And, according to the reports which circulate, they have a finger in all the trade in religious articles, and levy a percentage on the millions of chaplets, statuettes, and medals which are sold every year at Lourdes."

Majeste had now lowered his voice, for his accusations were becoming precise, and he ended by trembling somewhat at his imprudence in talking so confidentially to strangers. However, the expression of Pierre's gentle, attentive face reassured him; and so he continued with the passion of a wounded rival, resolved to go on to the very end: "I am willing to admit that there is some exaggeration

in all this. But all the same, it does religion no good for people to see the reverend Fathers keeping shops like us tradesmen. For my part, of course, I don't go and ask for a share of the money which they make by their masses, or a percentage on the presents which they receive, so why should they start selling what I sell? Our business was a poor one last year owing to them. There are already too many of us; nowadays everyone at Lourdes sells 'religious articles,' to such an extent, in fact, that there will soon be no butchers or wine merchants left – nothing but bread to eat and water to drink. Ah! Monsieur l'Abbe, it is no doubt nice to have the Blessed Virgin with us, but things are none the less very bad at times."

A person staying at the hotel at that moment disturbed him, but he returned just as a young girl came in search of Madame Majeste. The damsel, who evidently belonged to Lourdes, was very pretty, small but plump, with beautiful black hair, and a round face full of bright gaiety.

"That is our niece Apolline," resumed Majeste. "She has been keeping our shop for two years past. She is the daughter of one of my wife's brothers, who is in poor circumstances. She was keeping sheep at Ossun, in the neighbourhood of Bartres, when we were struck by her intelligence and nice looks and decided to bring her here; and we don't repent having done so, for she has a great deal of merit, and has become a very good saleswoman."

A point to which he omitted to refer, was that there were rumours current of somewhat flighty conduct on Mademoiselle Apolline's part. But she undoubtedly had her value: she attracted customers by the power, possibly, of her large black eyes, which smiled so readily. During his sojourn at Lourdes the previous year, Gerard de Peyrelongue had scarcely stirred from the shop she managed, and doubtless it was only the matrimonial ideas now flitting through his head that prevented him from returning thither. It seemed as though the Abbe des Hermoises had taken his place, for this gallant ecclesiastic brought a great many ladies to make purchases at the repository.

"Ah! you are speaking of Apolline," said Madame Majeste, at that moment coming back from the shop. "Have you noticed one thing about her, gentlemen – her extraordinary likeness to Bernadette? There, on the wall yonder, is a photograph of Bernadette when she was eighteen years old."

Pierre and M. de Guersaint drew near to examine the portrait, whilst Majeste exclaimed: "Bernadette, yes, certainly – she was rather like Apolline, but not nearly so nice; she looked so sad and poor."

He would doubtless have gone on chattering, but just then the waiter appeared and announced that there was at last a little table vacant. M. de Guersaint had twice gone to glance inside the dining-room, for he was eager to have his /dejeuner/ and spend the remainder of that fine Sunday out-of-doors. So he now hastened away, without paying any further attention to Majeste, who remarked, with an amiable smile, that the gentlemen had not had so very long to wait after all.

To reach the table mentioned by the waiter, the architect and Pierre had to cross the dining-room from end to end. It was a long apartment, painted a light oak colour, an oily yellow, which was already peeling away in places and soiled with stains in others. You realised that rapid wear and tear went on here amidst the continual scramble of the big eaters who sat down at table. The only ornaments were a gilt zinc clock and a couple of meagre candelabra on the mantelpiece. Guipure curtains, moreover, hung at the five large windows looking on to the street, which was flooded with sunshine; some of the fierce arrow-like rays penetrating into the room although the blinds had been lowered. And, in the middle of the apartment, some forty persons were packed together at the /table d'hote/, which was scarcely eleven yards in length and did not supply proper accommodation for more than thirty people; whilst at the little tables standing against the walls upon either side another forty persons sat close together, hustled by the three waiters each time that they went by. You had scarcely reached the threshold before you were deafened by the extraordinary uproar, the noise of voices and the clatter of forks and plates; and it seemed, too, as if you were entering a damp oven, for a warm, steamy mist, laden with a suffocating smell of victuals, assailed the face.

Pierre at first failed to distinguish anything, but, when he was installed at the little table – a garden-table which had been brought indoors for the occasion, and on which there was scarcely room for two covers – he felt quite upset, almost sick, in fact, at the sight presented by the /table d'hôte/, which his glance now enfilded from end to end. People had been eating at it for an hour already, two sets of customers had followed one upon the other, and the covers were strewn about in higgledy-piggledy fashion. On the cloth were numerous stains of wine and sauce, while there was no symmetry even in the arrangement of the glass fruit-stands, which formed the only decorations of the table. And one's astonishment increased at sight of the motley mob which was collected there – huge priests, scraggy girls, mothers overflowing with superfluous fat, gentlemen with red faces, and families ranged in rows and displaying all the pitiable, increasing ugliness of successive generations. All these people were perspiring, greedily swallowing, seated slantwise, lacking room to move their arms, and unable even to use their hands deftly. And amidst this display of appetite, increased tenfold by fatigue, and of eager haste to fill one's stomach in order to return to the Grotto more quickly, there was a corpulent ecclesiastic who in no wise hurried, but ate of every dish with prudent slowness, crunching his food with a ceaseless, dignified movement of the jaws.

"/Fichtre!/" exclaimed M. de Guersaint, "it is by no means cool in here. All the same, I shall be glad of something to eat, for I've felt a sinking in the stomach ever since I have been at Lourdes. And you – are you hungry?"

"Yes, yes, I shall eat," replied Pierre, though, truth to tell, he felt quite upset.

The /menu/ was a copious one. There was salmon, an omelet, mutton cutlets with mashed potatoes, stewed kidneys, cauliflowers, cold meats, and apricot tarts – everything cooked too much, and swimming in sauce which, but for its grittiness, would have been flavourless. However, there was some fairly fine fruit on the glass stands, particularly some peaches. And, besides, the people did not seem at all difficult to please; they apparently had no palates, for there was no sign of nausea. Hemmed in between an old priest and a dirty, full-bearded man, a girl of delicate build, who looked very pretty with her soft eyes and silken skin, was eating some kidneys with an expression of absolute beatitude, although the so-called "sauce" in which they swam was simply greyish water.

"Hum!" resumed even M. de Guersaint, "this salmon is not so bad. Add a little salt to it and you will find it all right."

Pierre made up his mind to eat, for after all he must take sustenance for strength's sake. At a little table close by, however, he had just caught sight of Madame Vignerón and Madame Chaise, who sat face to face, apparently waiting. And indeed, M. Vignerón and his son Gustave soon appeared, the latter still pale, and leaning more heavily than usual on his crutch. "Sit down next to your aunt," said his father; "I will take the chair beside your mother." But just then he perceived his two neighbours, and stepping up to them, he added: "Oh! he is now all right again. I have been rubbing him with some eau-de-Cologne, and by-and-by he will be able to take his bath at the piscina."

Thereupon M. Vignerón sat down and began to devour. But what an awful fright he had had! He again began talking of it aloud, despite himself, so intense had been his terror at the thought that the lad might go off before his aunt. The latter related that whilst she was kneeling at the Grotto the day before, she had experienced a sudden feeling of relief; in fact, she flattered herself that she was cured of her heart complaint, and began giving precise particulars, to which her brother-in-law listened with dilated eyes, full of involuntary anxiety. Most certainly he was a good-natured man, he had never desired anybody's death; only he felt indignant at the idea that the Virgin might cure this old woman, and forget his son, who was so young. Talking and eating, he had got to the cutlets, and was swallowing the mashed potatoes by the forkful, when he fancied he could detect that Madame Chaise was sulking with her nephew. "Gustave," he suddenly inquired, "have you asked your aunt's forgiveness?" The lad, quite astonished, began staring at his father with his large clear eyes. "Yes," added M. Vignerón, "you behaved very badly, you pushed her back just now when she wanted to help you to sit up."

Madame Chaise said nothing, but waited with a dignified air, whilst Gustave, who, without any show of appetite, was finishing the /noix/ of his cutlet, which had been cut into small pieces, remained with his eyes lowered on his plate, this time obstinately refusing to make the sorry show of affection which was demanded of him.

"Come, Gustave," resumed his father, "be a good boy. You know how kind your aunt is, and all that she intends to do for you."

But no, he would not yield. At that moment, indeed, he really hated that woman, who did not die quickly enough, who polluted the affection of his parents, to such a point that when he saw them surround him with attentions he no longer knew whether it were himself or the inheritance which his life represented that they wished to save. However, Madame Vigneron, so dignified in her demeanour, came to her husband's help. "You really grieve me, Gustave," said she; "ask your aunt's forgiveness, or you will make me quite angry with you."

Thereupon he gave way. What was the use of resisting? Was it not better that his parents should obtain that money? Would he not himself die later on, so as to suit the family convenience? He was aware of all that; he understood everything, even when not a word was spoken. So keen was the sense of hearing with which suffering had endowed him, that he even heard the others' thoughts.

"I beg your pardon, aunt," he said, "for not having behaved well to you just now."

Then two big tears rolled from his eyes, whilst he smiled with the air of a tender-hearted man who has seen too much of life and can no longer be deceived by anything. Madame Chaise at once kissed him and told him that she was not at all angry. And the Vignerons' delight in living was displayed in all candour.

"If the kidneys are not up to much," M. de Guersaint now said to Pierre, "here at all events are some cauliflowers with a good flavour."

The formidable mastication was still going on around them. Pierre had never seen such an amount of eating, amidst such perspiration, in an atmosphere as stifling as that of a washhouse full of hot steam. The odour of the victuals seemed to thicken into a kind of smoke. You had to shout to make yourself heard, for everybody was talking in loud tones, and the scared waiters raised a fearful clatter in changing the plates and forks; not to mention the noise of all the jaw-crunching, a mill-like grinding which was distinctly audible. What most hurt the feelings of the young priest, however, was the extraordinary promiscuity of the /table d'hôte/, at which men and women, young girls and ecclesiastics, were packed together in chance order, and satisfied their hunger like a pack of hounds snapping at offal in all haste. Baskets of bread went round and were promptly emptied. And there was a perfect massacre of cold meats, all the remnants of the victuals of the day before, leg of mutton, veal, and ham, encompassed by a fallen mass of transparent jelly which quivered like soft glue. They had all eaten too much already, but these viands seemed to whet their appetites afresh, as though the idea had come to them that nothing whatever ought to be left. The fat priest in the middle of the table, who had shown himself such a capital knife-and-fork, was now lingering over the fruit, having just got to his third peach, a huge one, which he slowly peeled and swallowed in slices with an air of compunction.

All at once, however, the whole room was thrown into agitation. A waiter had come in and begun distributing the letters which Madame Majeste had finished sorting. "Hallo!" exclaimed M. Vigneron; "a letter for me! This is surprising – I did not give my address to anybody." Then, at a sudden recollection, he added, "Yes I did, though; this must have come from Sauvageot, who is filling my place at the Ministry." He opened the letter, his hands began to tremble, and suddenly he raised a cry: "The chief clerk is dead!"

Deeply agitated, Madame Vigneron was also unable to bridle her tongue:

"Then you will have the appointment!"

This was the secret dream in which they had so long and so fondly indulged: the chief clerk's death, in order that he, Vigneron, assistant chief clerk for ten years past, might at last rise to the

supreme post, the bureaucratic marshalship. And so great was his delight that he cast aside all restraint. "Ah! the Blessed Virgin is certainly protecting me, my dear. Only this morning I again prayed to her for a rise, and, you see, she grants my prayer!"

However, finding Madame Chaise's eyes fixed upon his own, and seeing Gustave smile, he realised that he ought not to exult in this fashion. Each member of the family no doubt thought of his or her interests and prayed to the Blessed Virgin for such personal favours as might be desired. And so, again putting on his good-natured air, he resumed: "I mean that the Blessed Virgin takes an interest in every one of us and will send us all home well satisfied. Ah! the poor chief, I'm sorry for him. I shall have to send my card to his widow."

In spite of all his efforts he could not restrain his exultation, and no longer doubted that his most secret desires, those which he did not even confess to himself, would soon be gratified. And so all honour was done to the apricot tarts, even Gustave being allowed to eat a portion of one.

"It is surprising," now remarked M. de Guersaint, who had just ordered a cup of coffee; "it is surprising that one doesn't see more sick people here. All these folks seem to me to have first-rate appetites."

After a close inspection, however, in addition to Gustave, who ate no more than a little chicken, he ended by finding a man with a goitre seated at the /table d'hote/ between two women, one of whom certainly suffered from cancer. Farther on, too, there was a girl so thin and pale that she must surely be a consumptive. And still farther away there was a female idiot who had made her entry leaning on two relatives, and with expressionless eyes and lifeless features was now carrying her food to her mouth with a spoon, and slobbering over her napkin. Perhaps there were yet other ailing ones present who could not be distinguished among all those noisy appetites, ailing ones whom the journey had braced, and who were eating as they had not eaten for a long time past. The apricot tarts, the cheese, the fruits were all engulfed amidst the increasing disorder of the table, where at last there only remained the stains of all the wine and sauce which had been spilt upon the cloth.

It was nearly noon. "We will go back to the Grotto at once, eh?" said M.

Vignerou.

Indeed, "To the Grotto! To the Grotto!" were well-nigh the only words you now heard. The full mouths were eagerly masticating and swallowing, in order that they might repeat prayers and hymns again with all speed. "Well, as we have the whole afternoon before us," declared M. de Guersaint, "I suggest that we should visit the town a little. I want to see also if I can get a conveyance for my excursion, as my daughter so particularly wishes me to make it."

Pierre, who was stifling, was glad indeed to leave the dining-room. In the porch he was able to breathe again, though even there he found a torrent of customers, new arrivals who were waiting for places. No sooner did one of the little tables become vacant than its possession was eagerly contested, whilst the smallest gap at the /table d'hote/ was instantly filled up. In this wise the assault would continue for more than another hour, and again would the different courses of the /menu/ appear in procession, to be engulfed amidst the crunching of jaws, the stifling heat, and the growing nausea.

II

THE "ORDINARY."

WHEN Pierre and M. de Guersaint got outside they began walking slowly amidst the ever-growing stream of the Sundayfied crowd. The sky was a bright blue, the sun warmed the whole town, and there was a festive gaiety in the atmosphere, the keen delight that attends those great fairs which bring entire communities into the open air. When they had descended the crowded footway of the Avenue de la Grotte, and had reached the corner of the Plateau de la Merlasse, they found their way barred by a throng which was flowing backward amidst a block of vehicles and stamping of horses. "There is no hurry, however," remarked M. de Guersaint. "My idea is to go as far as the Place du Marcadal in the old town; for the servant girl at the hotel told me of a hairdresser there whose brother lets out conveyances cheaply. Do you mind going so far?"

"I?" replied Pierre. "Go wherever you like, I'll follow you."

"All right – and I'll profit by the opportunity to have a shave."

They were nearing the Place du Rosaire, and found themselves in front of the lawns stretching to the Gave, when an encounter again stopped them. Mesdames Desagneaux and Raymonde de Jonquiere were here, chatting gaily with Gerard de Peyrelongue. Both women wore light-coloured gowns, seaside dresses as it were, and their white silk parasols shone in the bright sunlight. They imparted, so to say, a pretty note to the scene – a touch of society chatter blended with the fresh laughter of youth.

"No, no," Madame Desagneaux was saying, "we certainly can't go and visit your 'ordinary' like that – at the very moment when all your comrades are eating."

Gerard, however, with a very gallant air, insisted on their accompanying him, turning more particularly towards Raymonde, whose somewhat massive face was that day brightened by the radiant charm of health.

"But it is a very curious sight, I assure you," said the young man, "and you would be very respectfully received. Trust yourself to me, mademoiselle. Besides, we should certainly find M. Berthaud there, and he would be delighted to do you the honours."

Raymonde smiled, her clear eyes plainly saying that she was quite agreeable. And just then, as Pierre and M. de Guersaint drew near in order to present their respects to the ladies, they were made acquainted with the question under discussion. The "ordinary" was a kind of restaurant or /table d'hote/ which the members of the Hospitality of Our Lady of Salvation – the bearers, the hospitallers of the Grotto, the piscinas, and the hospitals – had established among themselves with the view of taking their meals together at small cost. Many of them were not rich, for they were recruited among all classes; however, they had contrived to secure three good meals for the daily payment of three francs apiece. And in fact they soon had provisions to spare and distributed them among the poor. Everything was in their own management; they purchased their own supplies, recruited a cook and a few waiters, and did not disdain to lend a hand themselves, in order that everything might be comfortable and orderly.

"It must be very interesting," said M. de Guersaint, when these explanations had been given him. "Let us go and see it, if we are not in the way."

Little Madame Desagneaux thereupon gave her consent. "Well, if we are going in a party," said she, "I am quite willing. But when this gentleman first proposed to take Raymonde and me, I was afraid that it might not be quite proper."

Then, as she began to laugh, the others followed her example. She had accepted M. de Guersaint's arm, and Pierre walked beside her on the other hand, experiencing a sudden feeling of

sympathy for this gay little woman, who was so full of life and so charming with her fair frizzy hair and creamy complexion.

Behind them came Raymonde, leaning upon Gerard's arm and talking to him in the calm, staid voice of a young lady who holds the best principles despite her air of heedless youth. And since here was the husband whom she had so often dreamt of, she resolved that she would this time secure him, make him beyond all question her own. She intoxicated him with the perfume of health and youth which she diffused, and at the same time astonished him by her knowledge of housewifely duties and of the manner in which money may be economised even in the most trifling matters; for having questioned him with regard to the purchases which he and his comrades made for their "ordinary," she proceeded to show him that they might have reduced their expenditure still further.

Meantime M. de Guersaint and Madame Desagneaux were also chatting together: "You must be fearfully tired, madame," said the architect.

But with a gesture of revolt, and an exclamation of genuine anger, she replied: "Oh no, indeed! Last night, it is true, fatigue quite overcame me at the hospital; I sat down and dozed off, and Madame de Jonquiere and the other ladies were good enough to let me sleep on." At this the others again began to laugh; but still with the same angry air she continued: "And so I slept like a log until this morning. It was disgraceful, especially as I had sworn that I would remain up all night." Then, merriment gaining upon her in her turn, she suddenly burst into a sonorous laugh, displaying her beautiful white teeth. "Ah! a pretty nurse I am, and no mistake! It was poor Madame de Jonquiere who had to remain on her legs all the time. I tried to coax her to come out with us just now. But she preferred to take a little rest."

Raymonde, who overheard these words, thereupon raised her voice to say: "Yes, indeed, my poor mamma could no longer keep on her feet. It was I who compelled her to lie down, telling her that she could go to sleep without any uneasiness, for we should get on all right without her – "

So saying, the girl gave Gerard a laughing glance. He even fancied that he could detect a faint squeeze of the fresh round arm which was resting on his own, as though, indeed, she had wished to express her happiness at being alone with him so that they might settle their own affairs without any interference. This quite delighted him; and he began to explain that if he had not had /dejeuner/ with his comrades that day, it was because some friends had invited him to join them at the railway-station refreshment-room at ten o'clock, and had not given him his liberty until after the departure of the eleven-thirty train.

"Ah! the rascals!" he suddenly resumed. "Do you hear them, mademoiselle?"

The little party was now nearing its destination, and the uproarious laughter and chatter of youth rang out from a clump of trees which concealed the old zinc and plaster building in which the "ordinary" was installed. Gerard began by taking the visitors into the kitchen, a very spacious apartment, well fitted up, and containing a huge range and an immense table, to say nothing of numerous gigantic cauldrons. Here, moreover, the young man called the attention of his companions to the circumstance that the cook, a fat, jovial-looking man, had the red cross pinned on his white jacket, being himself a member of the pilgrimage. Then, pushing open a door, Gerard invited his friends to enter the common room.

It was a long apartment containing two rows of plain deal tables; and the only other articles of furniture were numerous rush-seated tavern chairs, with an additional table which served as a sideboard. The whitewashed walls and the flooring of shiny, red tiles looked, however, extremely clean amidst this intentional bareness, which was similar to that of a monkish refectory. But, the feature of the place which more particularly struck you, as you crossed the threshold, was the childish gaiety which reigned there; for, packed together at the tables, were a hundred and fifty hospitallers of all ages, eating with splendid appetites, laughing, applauding, and singing, with their mouths full. A wondrous fraternity united these men, who had flocked to Lourdes from every province of France, and who belonged to all classes, and represented every degree of fortune. Many of them knew nothing of one another, save that they met here and elbowed one another during three days every year, living

together like brothers, and then going off and remaining in absolute ignorance of each other during the rest of the twelvemonth. Nothing could be more charming, however, than to meet again at the next pilgrimage, united in the same charitable work, and to spend a few days of hard labour and boyish delight in common once more; for it all became, as it were, an "outing" of a number of big fellows, let loose under a lovely sky, and well pleased to be able to enjoy themselves and laugh together. And even the frugality of the table, with the pride of managing things themselves, of eating the provisions which they had purchased and cooked, added to the general good humour.

"You see," explained Gerard, "we are not at all inclined to be sad, although we have so much hard work to get through. The Hospitality numbers more than three hundred members, but there are only about one hundred and fifty here at a time, for we have had to organise two successive services, so that there may always be some of us on duty at the Grotto and the hospitals."

The sight of the little party of visitors assembled on the threshold of the room seemed to have increased the general delight; and Berthaud, the superintendent of the bearers, who was lunching at the head of one of the tables, gallantly rose up to receive the ladies.

"But it smells very nice," exclaimed Madame Desagneaux in her giddy way.

"Won't you invite us to come and taste your cookery to-morrow?"

"Oh! we can't ask ladies," replied Berthaud, laughing. "But if you gentlemen would like to join us to-morrow we should be extremely pleased to entertain you."

He had at once noticed the good understanding which prevailed between Gerard and Raymonde, and seemed delighted at it, for he greatly wished his cousin to make this match. He laughed pleasantly, at the enthusiastic gaiety which the young girl displayed as she began to question him. "Is not that the Marquis de Salmon-Roquebert," she asked, "who is sitting over yonder between those two young men who look like shop assistants?"

"They are, in fact, the sons of a small stationer at Tarbes," replied Berthaud; "and that is really the Marquis, your neighbour of the Rue de Lille, the owner of that magnificent mansion, one of the richest and most noble men of title in France. You see how he is enjoying our mutton stew!"

It was true, the millionaire Marquis seemed delighted to be able to board himself for his three francs a day, and to sit down at table in genuine democratic fashion by the side of petty /bourgeois/ and workmen who would not have dared to accost him in the street. Was not that chance table symbolical of social communion, effected by the joint practice of charity? For his part, the Marquis was the more hungry that day, as he had bathed over sixty patients, sufferers from all the most abominable diseases of unhappy humanity, at the piscinas that morning. And the scene around him seemed like a realisation of the evangelical commonalty; but doubtless it was so charming and so gay simply because its duration was limited to three days.

Although M. de Guersaint had but lately risen from table, his curiosity prompted him to taste the mutton stew, and he pronounced it perfect. Meantime, Pierre caught sight of Baron Suire, the director of the Hospitality, walking about between the rows of tables with an air of some importance, as though he had allotted himself the task of keeping an eye on everything, even on the manner in which his staff fed itself. The young priest thereupon remembered the ardent desire which Marie had expressed to spend the night in front of the Grotto, and it occurred to him that the Baron might be willing to give the necessary authorisation.

"Certainly," replied the director, who had become quite grave whilst listening to Pierre, "we do sometimes allow it; but it is always a very delicate matter! You assure me at all events that this young person is not consumptive? Well, well, since you say that she so much desires it I will mention the matter to Father Fourcade and warn Madame de Jonquiere, so that she may let you take the young lady away."

He was in reality a very good-natured fellow, albeit so fond of assuming the air of an indispensable man weighed down by the heaviest responsibilities. In his turn he now detained the visitors, and gave them full particulars concerning the organisation of the Hospitality. Its members

said prayers together every morning. Two board meetings were held each day, and were attended by all the heads of departments, as well as by the reverend Fathers and some of the chaplains. All the hospitallers took the Sacrament as frequently as possible. And, moreover, there were many complicated tasks to be attended to, a prodigious rotation of duties, quite a little world to be governed with a firm hand. The Baron spoke like a general who each year gains a great victory over the spirit of the age; and, sending Berthaud back to finish his /dejeuner/, he insisted on escorting the ladies into the little sanded courtyard, which was shaded by some fine trees.

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