

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE THREE CITIES

TRILOGY: PARIS, VOLUME

1

Émile Zola
The Three Cities
Trilogy: Paris, Volume 1

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25559580

The Three Cities Trilogy: Paris, Volume 1:

Содержание

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE	4
BOOK I	11
I	11
II	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

Émile Zola

The Three Cities

Trilogy: Paris, Volume 1

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

WITH the present work M. Zola completes the "Trilogy of the Three Cities," which he began with " Lourdes " and continued with " Rome "; and thus the adventures and experiences of Abbe Pierre Froment, the doubting Catholic priest who failed to find faith at the miraculous grotto by the Cave, and hope amidst the crumbling theocracy of the Vatican, are here brought to what, from M. Zola's point of view, is their logical conclusion. From the first pages of " Lourdes, " many readers will have divined that Abbe Froment was bound to finish as he does, for, frankly, no other finish was possible from a writer of M. Zola's opinions.

Taking the Trilogy as a whole, one will find that it is essentially symbolical. Abbe Froment is Man, and his struggles are the struggles between Religion, as personified by the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand, and Reason and Life on the other. In the Abbe's case the victory ultimately rests with the latter; and we may take it as being M. Zola's opinion that the same will eventually be the case with the great bulk of mankind.

English writers are often accused of treating subjects from an insular point of view, and certainly there may be good ground for such a charge. But they are not the only writers guilty of the practice. The purview of French authors is often quite as limited: they regard French opinion as the only good opinion, and judge the rest of the world by their own standard. In the present case, if we leave the world and mankind generally on one side, and apply M. Zola's facts and theories to France alone, it will be found, I think, that he has made out a remarkably good case for himself. For it is certain that Catholicism, I may say Christianity, is fast crumbling in France. There may be revivals in certain limited circles, efforts of the greatest energy to prop up the tottering edifice by a "rallying" of believers to the democratic cause, and by a kindling of the most bitter anti-Semitic warfare; but all these revivals and efforts, although they are extremely well-advertised and create no little stir, produce very little impression on the bulk of the population. So far as France is concerned, the policy of Leo XIII. seems to have come too late. The French masses regard Catholicism or Christianity, whichever one pleases, as a religion of death, – a religion which, taking its stand on the text "There shall always be poor among you," condemns them to toil and moil in poverty and distress their whole life long, with no other consolation than the promise of happiness in heaven. And, on the other hand, they see the ministers of the Deity, "whose kingdom is not of this world," supporting the wealthy and powerful, and striving to secure wealth and power for themselves.

Charity exists, of course, but the masses declare that it is no remedy; they do not ask for doles, they ask for Justice. It is largely by reason of all this that Socialism and Anarchism have made such great strides in France of recent years. Robespierre, as will be remembered, once tried to suppress Christianity altogether, and for a time certainly there was a virtually general cessation of religious observances in France. But no such Reign of Terror prevails there to-day. Men are perfectly free to believe if they are inclined to do so; and yet never were there fewer religious marriages, fewer baptisms or smaller congregations in the French churches. I refer not merely to Paris and other large cities, but to the smaller towns, and even the little hamlets of many parts. Old village priests, men practising what they teach and possessed of the most loving, benevolent hearts, have told me with tears in their eyes of the growing infidelity of their parishioners.

I have been studying this matter for some years, and write without prejudice, merely setting down what I believe to be the truth. Of course we are all aware that the most stupendous efforts are being made by the Catholic clergy and zealous believers to bring about a revival of the faith, and certainly in some circles there has been a measure of success. But the reconversion of a nation is the most formidable of tasks; and, in my own opinion, as in M. Zola's, France as a whole is lost to the Christian religion. On this proposition, combined with a second one, namely, that even as France as a nation will be the first to discard Christianity, so she will be the first to promulgate a new faith based on reason,

science and the teachings of life, is founded the whole argument of M. Zola's Trilogy.

Having thus dealt with the Trilogy's religious aspects, I would now speak of "Paris," its concluding volume. This is very different from "Lourdes" and "Rome." Whilst recounting the struggles and fate of Abbe Froment and his brother Guillaume, and entering largely into the problem of Capital and Labour, which problem has done so much to turn the masses away from Christianity, it contains many an interesting and valuable picture of the Parisian world at the close of the nineteenth century. It is no guide-book to Paris; but it paints the city's social life, its rich and poor, its scandals and crimes, its work and its pleasures. Among the households to which the reader is introduced are those of a banker, an aged Countess of the old *noblesse*, a cosmopolitan Princess, of a kind that Paris knows only too well, a scientist, a manufacturer, a working mechanic, a priest, an Anarchist, a petty clerk and an actress of a class that so often dishonours the French stage. Science and art and learning and religion, all have their representatives. Then, too, the political world is well to the front. There are honest and unscrupulous Ministers of State, upright and venal deputies, enthusiastic and cautious candidates for power, together with social theoreticians of various schools. And the *blase*, weak-minded man of fashion is here, as well as the young "symbolist" of perverted, degraded mind. The women are of all types, from the most loathsome to the most lovable. Then, too, the journalists are portrayed in such

life-like fashion that I might give each of them his real name. And journalism, Parisian journalism, is flagellated, shown as it really is, – if just a few well-conducted organs be excepted, – that is, venal and impudent, mendacious and even petty.

The actual scenes depicted are quite as kaleidoscopic as are the characters in their variety. We enter the banker's gilded saloon and the hovel of the pauper, the busy factory, the priest's retired home and the laboratory of the scientist. We wait in the lobbies of the Chamber of Deputies, and afterwards witness "a great debate"; we penetrate into the private sanctum of a Minister of the Interior; we attend a fashionable wedding at the Madeleine and a first performance at the Comedie Francaise; we dine at the Cafe Anglais and listen to a notorious vocalist in a low music hall at Montmartre; we pursue an Anarchist through the Bois de Boulogne; we slip into the Assize Court and see that Anarchist tried there; we afterwards gaze upon his execution by the guillotine; we are also on the boulevards when the lamps are lighted for a long night of revelry, and we stroll along the quiet streets in the small hours of the morning, when crime and homeless want are prowling round.

And ever the scene changes; the whole world of Paris passes before one. Yet the book, to my thinking, is far less descriptive than analytical. The souls of the principal characters are probed to their lowest depths. Many of the scenes, too, are intensely dramatic, admirably adapted for the stage; as, for instance, Baroness Duvillard's interview with her daughter in the chapter

which I have called "The Rivals." And side by side with baseness there is heroism, while beauty of the flesh finds its counterpart in beauty of the mind. M. Zola has often been reproached for showing us the vileness of human nature; and no doubt such vileness may be found in "Paris," but there are contrasting pictures. If some of M. Zola's characters horrify the reader, there are others that the latter can but admire. Life is compounded of good and evil, and unfortunately it is usually the evil that makes the most noise and attracts the most attention. Moreover, in M. Zola's case, it has always been his purpose to expose the evils from which society suffers in the hope of directing attention to them and thereby hastening a remedy, and thus, in the course of his works, he could not do otherwise than drag the whole frightful mass of human villany and degradation into the full light of day. But if there are, again, black pages in "Paris," others, bright and comforting, will be found near them. And the book ends in no pessimist strain. Whatever may be thought of the writer's views on religion, most readers will, I imagine, agree with his opinion that, despite much social injustice, much crime, vice, cupidity and baseness, we are ever marching on to better things.

In the making of the coming, though still far-away, era of truth and justice, Paris, he thinks, will play the leading part, for whatever the stains upon her, they are but surface-deep; her heart remains good and sound; she has genius and courage and energy and wit and fancy. She can be generous, too, when she chooses, and more than once her ideas have irradiated the world. Thus

M. Zola hopes much from her, and who will gainsay him? Not I, who can apply to her the words which Byron addressed to the home of my own and M. Zola's forefathers: —

"I loved her from my boyhood; she to me
Was as a fairy city of the heart."

Thus I can but hope that Paris, where I learnt the little I know, where I struggled and found love and happiness, whose every woe and disaster and triumph I have shared for over thirty years, may, however dark the clouds that still pass over her, some day fully justify M. Zola's confidence, and bring to pass his splendid dream of perfect truth and perfect justice.

E. A. V.

MERTON, SURREY, ENGLAND,

Feb. 5, 1898.

BOOK I

I

THE PRIEST AND THE POOR

THAT morning, one towards the end of January, Abbe Pierre Froment, who had a mass to say at the Sacred Heart at Montmartre, was on the height, in front of the basilica, already at eight o'clock. And before going in he gazed for a moment upon the immensity of Paris spread out below him.

After two months of bitter cold, ice and snow, the city was steeped in a mournful, quivering thaw. From the far-spreading, leaden-hued heavens a thick mist fell like a mourning shroud. All the eastern portion of the city, the abodes of misery and toil, seemed submerged beneath ruddy steam, amid which the panting of workshops and factories could be divined; while westwards, towards the districts of wealth and enjoyment, the fog broke and lightened, becoming but a fine and motionless veil of vapour. The curved line of the horizon could scarcely be divined, the expanse of houses, which nothing bounded, appeared like a chaos of stone, studded with stagnant pools, which filled the hollows with pale steam; whilst against them the summits of the edifices, the housetops of the loftier streets, showed black

like soot. It was a Paris of mystery, shrouded by clouds, buried as it were beneath the ashes of some disaster, already half-sunken in the suffering and the shame of that which its immensity concealed.

Thin and sombre in his flimsy cassock, Pierre was looking on when Abbe Rose, who seemed to have sheltered himself behind a pillar of the porch on purpose to watch for him, came forward: "Ah! it's you at last, my dear child," said he, "I have something to ask you."

He seemed embarrassed and anxious, and glanced round distrustfully to make sure that nobody was near. Then, as if the solitude thereabouts did not suffice to reassure him, he led Pierre some distance away, through the icy, biting wind, which he himself did not seem to feel. "This is the matter," he resumed, "I have been told that a poor fellow, a former house-painter, an old man of seventy, who naturally can work no more, is dying of hunger in a hovel in the Rue des Saules. So, my dear child, I thought of you. I thought you would consent to take him these three francs from me, so that he may at least have some bread to eat for a few days."

"But why don't you take him your alms yourself?"

At this Abbe Rose again grew anxious, and cast vague, frightened glances about him. "Oh, no, oh, no!" he said, "I can no longer do that after all the worries that have befallen me. You know that I am watched, and should get another scolding if I were caught giving alms like this, scarcely knowing to whom I

give them. It is true that I had to sell something to get these three francs. But, my dear child, render me this service, I pray you."

Pierre, with heart oppressed, stood contemplating the old priest, whose locks were quite white, whose full lips spoke of infinite kindness, and whose eyes shone clear and childlike in his round and smiling face. And he bitterly recalled the story of that lover of the poor, the semi-disgrace into which he had fallen through the sublime candour of his charitable goodness. His little ground-floor of the Rue de Charonne, which he had turned into a refuge where he offered shelter to all the wretchedness of the streets, had ended by giving cause for scandal. His *naivete* and innocence had been abused; and abominable things had gone on under his roof without his knowledge. Vice had turned the asylum into a meeting-place; and at last, one night, the police had descended upon it to arrest a young girl accused of infanticide. Greatly concerned by this scandal, the diocesan authorities had forced Abbe Rose to close his shelter, and had removed him from the church of Ste. Marguerite to that of St. Pierre of Montmartre, where he now again acted as curate. Truth to tell, it was not a disgrace but a removal to another spot. However, he had been scolded and was watched, as he said; and he was much ashamed of it, and very unhappy at being only able to give alms by stealth, much like some harebrained prodigal who blushes for his faults.

Pierre took the three francs. "I promise to execute your commission, my friend, oh! with all my heart," he said.

"You will go after your mass, won't you? His name is Laveuve,

he lives in the Rue des Saules in a house with a courtyard, just before reaching the Rue Marcadet. You are sure to find it. And if you want to be very kind you will tell me of your visit this evening at five o'clock, at the Madeleine, where I am going to hear Monseigneur Martha's address. He has been so good to me. Won't you also come to hear him?"

Pierre made an evasive gesture. Monseigneur Martha, Bishop of Persepolis and all powerful at the archiepiscopal palace, since, like the genial propagandist he was, he had been devoting himself to increasing the subscriptions for the basilica of the Sacred Heart, had indeed supported Abbe Rose; in fact, it was by his influence that the abbe had been kept in Paris, and placed once more at St. Pierre de Montmartre.

"I don't know if I shall be able to hear the address," said Pierre, "but in any case I will go there to meet you."

The north wind was blowing, and the gloomy cold penetrated both of them on that deserted summit amidst the fog which changed the vast city into a misty ocean. However, some footsteps were heard, and Abbe Rose, again mistrustful, saw a man go by, a tall and sturdy man, who wore clogs and was bareheaded, showing his thick and closely-cut white hair. "Is not that your brother?" asked the old priest.

Pierre had not stirred. "Yes, it is my brother Guillaume," he quietly responded. "I have found him again since I have been coming occasionally to the Sacred Heart. He owns a house close by, where he has been living for more than twenty years, I think.

When we meet we shake hands, but I have never even been to his house. Oh! all is quite dead between us, we have nothing more in common, we are parted by worlds."

Abbe Rose's tender smile again appeared, and he waved his hand as if to say that one must never despair of love. Guillaume Froment, a savant of lofty intelligence, a chemist who lived apart from others, like one who rebelled against the social system, was now a parishioner of the abbe's, and when the latter passed the house where Guillaume lived with his three sons – a house all alive with work – he must often have dreamt of leading him back to God.

"But, my dear child," he resumed, "I am keeping you here in this dark cold, and you are not warm. Go and say your mass. Till this evening, at the Madeleine." Then, in entreating fashion, after again making sure that none could hear them, he added, still with the air of a child at fault: "And not a word to anybody about my little commission – it would again be said that I don't know how to conduct myself."

Pierre watched the old priest as he went off towards the Rue Cartot, where he lived on a damp ground-floor, enlivened by a strip of garden. The veil of disaster, which was submerging Paris, now seemed to grow thicker under the gusts of the icy north wind. And at last Pierre entered the basilica, his heart upset, overflowing with the bitterness stirred up by the recollection of Abbe Rose's story – that bankruptcy of charity, the frightful irony of a holy man punished for bestowing alms, and hiding himself

that he might still continue to bestow them. Nothing could calm the smart of the wound reopened in Pierre's heart – neither the warm peacefulness into which he entered, nor the silent solemnity of the broad, deep fabric, whose new stonework was quite bare, without a single painting or any kind of decoration, the nave being still half-barred by the scaffoldings which blocked up the unfinished dome. At that early hour the masses of entreaty had already been said at several altars, under the grey light falling from the high and narrow windows, and the tapers of entreaty were burning in the depths of the apse. So Pierre made haste to go to the sacristy, there to assume his vestments in order that he might say his mass in the chapel of St. Vincent de Paul.

But the floodgates of memory had been opened, and he had no thought but for his distress whilst, in mechanical fashion, he performed the rites and made the customary gestures. Since his return from Rome three years previously, he had been living in the very worst anguish that can fall on man. At the outset, in order to recover his lost faith, he had essayed a first experiment: he had gone to Lourdes, there to seek the innocent belief of the child who kneels and prays, the primitive faith of young nations bending beneath the terror born of ignorance; but he had rebelled yet more than ever in presence of what he had witnessed at Lourdes: that glorification of the absurd, that collapse of common sense; and was convinced that salvation, the peace of men and nations nowadays, could not lie in that puerile relinquishment of reason. And afterwards, again yielding to the

need of loving whilst yet allowing reason, so hard to satisfy, her share in his intellect, he had staked his final peace on a second experiment, and had gone to Rome to see if Catholicism could there be renewed, could revert to the spirit of primitive Christianity and become the religion of the democracy, the faith which the modern world, upheaving and in danger of death, was awaiting in order to calm down and live. And he had found there naught but ruins, the rotted trunk of a tree that could never put forth another springtide; and he had heard there naught but the supreme rending of the old social edifice, near to its fall. Then it was, that, relapsing into boundless doubt, total negation, he had been recalled to Paris by Abbe Rose, in the name of their poor, and had returned thither that he might forget and immolate himself and believe in them – the poor – since they and their frightful sufferings alone remained certain. And then it was too, that for three years he came into contact with that collapse, that very bankruptcy of goodness itself: charity a derision, charity useless and flouted.

Those three years had been lived by Pierre amidst ever-growing torments, in which his whole being had ended by sinking. His faith was forever dead; dead, too, even his hope of utilising the faith of the multitudes for the general salvation. He denied everything, he anticipated nothing but the final, inevitable catastrophe: revolt, massacre and conflagration, which would sweep away a guilty and condemned world. Unbelieving priest that he was, yet watching over the faith of others, honestly,

chastely discharging his duties, full of haughty sadness at the thought that he had been unable to renounce his mind as he had renounced his flesh and his dream of being a saviour of the nations, he withal remained erect, full of fierce yet solitary grandeur. And this despairing, denying priest, who had dived to the bottom of nothingness, retained such a lofty and grave demeanour, perfumed by such pure kindness, that in his parish of Neuilly he had acquired the reputation of being a young saint, one beloved by Providence, whose prayers wrought miracles. He was but a personification of the rules of the Church; of the priest he retained only the gestures; he was like an empty sepulchre in which not even the ashes of hope remained; yet grief-stricken weeping women worshipped him and kissed his cassock; and it was a tortured mother whose infant was in danger of death, who had implored him to come and ask that infant's cure of Jesus, certain as she felt that Jesus would grant her the boon in that sanctuary of Montmartre where blazed the prodigy of His heart, all burning with love.

Clad in his vestments, Pierre had reached the chapel of St. Vincent de Paul. He there ascended the altar-step and began the mass; and when he turned round with hands spread out to bless the worshippers he showed his hollow cheeks, his gentle mouth contracted by bitterness, his loving eyes darkened by suffering. He was no longer the young priest whose countenance had glowed with tender fever on the road to Lourdes, whose face had been illumined by apostolic fervour when he started for

Rome. The two hereditary influences which were ever at strife within him – that of his father to whom he owed his impregnable, towering brow, that of his mother who had given him his love-thirsting lips, were still waging war, the whole human battle of sentiment and reason, in that now ravaged face of his, whither in moments of forgetfulness ascended all the chaos of internal suffering. The lips still confessed that unquenched thirst for love, self-bestowal and life, which he well thought he could nevermore content, whilst the solid brow, the citadel which made him suffer, obstinately refused to capitulate, whatever might be the assaults of error. But he stiffened himself, hid the horror of the void in which he struggled, and showed himself superb, making each gesture, repeating each word in sovereign fashion. And gazing at him through her tears, the mother who was there among the few kneeling women, the mother who awaited a supreme intercession from him, who thought him in communion with Jesus for the salvation of her child, beheld him radiant with angelic beauty like some messenger of the divine grace.

When, after the offertory, Pierre uncovered the chalice he felt contempt for himself. The shock had been too great, and he thought of those things in spite of all. What puerility there had been in his two experiments at Lourdes and Rome, the *naivete* of a poor distracted being, consumed by desire to love and believe. To have imagined that present-day science would in his person accommodate itself to the faith of the year One Thousand, and in particular to have foolishly believed that he, petty priest that he

was, would be able to indoctrinate the Pope and prevail on him to become a saint and change the face of the world! It all filled him with shame; how people must have laughed at him! Then, too, his idea of a schism made him blush. He again beheld himself at Rome, dreaming of writing a book by which he would violently sever himself from Catholicism to preach the new religion of the democracies, the purified, human and living Gospel. But what ridiculous folly! A schism? He had known in Paris an abbe of great heart and mind who had attempted to bring about that famous, predicted, awaited schism. Ah! the poor man, the sad, the ludicrous labour in the midst of universal incredulity, the icy indifference of some, the mockery and the reviling of others! If Luther were to come to France in our days he would end, forgotten and dying of hunger, on a Batignolles fifth-floor. A schism cannot succeed among a people that no longer believes, that has ceased to take all interest in the Church, and sets its hope elsewhere. And it was all Catholicism, in fact all Christianity, that would be swept away, for, apart from certain moral maxims, the Gospel no longer supplied a possible code for society. And this conviction increased Pierre's torment on the days when his cassock weighed more heavily on his shoulders, when he ended by feeling contempt for himself at thus celebrating the divine mystery of the mass, which for him had become but the formula of a dead religion.

Having half filled the chalice with wine from the vase, Pierre washed his hands and again perceived the mother with her face

of ardent entreaty. Then he thought it was for her that, with the charitable leanings of a vow-bound man, he had remained a priest, a priest without belief, feeding the belief of others with the bread of illusion. But this heroic conduct, the haughty spirit of duty in which he imprisoned himself, was not practised by him without growing anguish. Did not elementary probity require that he should cast aside the cassock and return into the midst of men? At certain times the falsity of his position filled him with disgust for his useless heroism; and he asked himself if it were not cowardly and dangerous to leave the masses in superstition. Certainly the theory of a just and vigilant Providence, of a future paradise where all these sufferings of the world would receive compensation, had long seemed necessary to the wretchedness of mankind; but what a trap lay in it, what a pretext for the tyrannical grinding down of nations; and how far more virile it would be to undeceive the nations, however brutally, and give them courage to live the real life, even if it were in tears. If they were already turning aside from Christianity was not this because they needed a more human ideal, a religion of health and joy which should not be a religion of death? On the day when the idea of charity should crumble, Christianity would crumble also, for it was built upon the idea of divine charity correcting the injustice of fate, and offering future rewards to those who might suffer in this life. And it was crumbling; for the poor no longer believed in it, but grew angry at the thought of that deceptive paradise, with the promise of which their patience had been beguiled so

long, and demanded that their share of happiness should not always be put off until the morrow of death. A cry for justice arose from every lip, for justice upon this earth, justice for those who hunger and thirst, whom alms are weary of relieving after eighteen hundred years of Gospel teaching, and who still and ever lack bread to eat.

When Pierre, with his elbows on the altar, had emptied the chalice after breaking the sacred wafer, he felt himself sinking into yet greater distress. And so a third experiment was beginning for him, the supreme battle of justice against charity, in which his heart and his mind would struggle together in that great Paris, so full of terrible, unknown things. The need for the divine still battled within him against domineering intelligence. How among the masses would one ever be able to content the thirst for the mysterious? Leaving the *elite* on one side, would science suffice to pacify desire, lull suffering, and satisfy the dream? And what would become of himself in the bankruptcy of that same charity, which for three years had alone kept him erect by occupying his every hour, and giving him the illusion of self-devotion, of being useful to others? It seemed, all at once, as if the ground sank beneath him, and he heard nothing save the cry of the masses, silent so long, but now demanding justice, growling and threatening to take their share, which was withheld from them by force and ruse. Nothing more, it seemed, could delay the inevitable catastrophe, the fratricidal class warfare that would sweep away the olden world, which was condemned to

disappear beneath the mountain of its crimes. Every hour with frightful sadness he expected the collapse, Paris steeped in blood, Paris in flames. And his horror of all violence froze him; he knew not where to seek the new belief which might dissipate the peril. Fully conscious, though he was, that the social and religious problems are but one, and are alone in question in the dreadful daily labour of Paris, he was too deeply troubled himself, too far removed from ordinary things by his position as a priest, and too sorely rent by doubt and powerlessness to tell as yet where might be truth, and health, and life. Ah! to be healthy and to live, to content at last both heart and reason in the peace, the certain, simply honest labour, which man has come to accomplish upon this earth!

The mass was finished, and Pierre descended from the altar, when the weeping mother, near whom he passed, caught hold of a corner of the chasuble with her trembling hands, and kissed it with wild fervour, as one may kiss some relic of a saint from whom one expects salvation. She thanked him for the miracle which he must have accomplished, certain as she felt that she would find her child cured. And he was deeply stirred by that love, that ardent faith of hers, in spite of the sudden and yet keener distress which he felt at being in no wise the sovereign minister that she thought him, the minister able to obtain a respite from Death. But he dismissed her consoled and strengthened, and it was with an ardent prayer that he entreated the unknown but conscious Power to succour the poor creature. Then, when

he had divested himself in the sacristy, and found himself again out of doors before the basilica, lashed by the keen wintry wind, a mortal shiver came upon him, and froze him, while through the mist he looked to see if a whirlwind of anger and justice had not swept Paris away: that catastrophe which must some day destroy it, leaving under the leaden heavens only the pestilential quagmire of its ruins.

Pierre wished to fulfil Abbe Rose's commission immediately. He followed the Rue des Norvins, on the crest of Montmartre; and, reaching the Rue des Saules, descended by its steep slope, between mossy walls, to the other side of Paris. The three francs which he was holding in his cassock's pocket, filled him at once with gentle emotion and covert anger against the futility of charity. But as he gradually descended by the sharp declivities and interminable storeys of steps, the mournful nooks of misery which he espied took possession of him, and infinite pity wrung his heart. A whole new district was here being built alongside the broad thoroughfares opened since the great works of the Sacred Heart had begun. Lofty middle-class houses were already rising among ripped-up gardens and plots of vacant land, still edged with palings. And these houses with their substantial frontages, all new and white, lent a yet more sombre and leprous aspect to such of the old shaky buildings as remained, the low pot-houses with blood-coloured walls, the *cites* of workmen's dwellings, those abodes of suffering with black, soiled buildings in which human cattle were piled. Under the low-hanging sky that day, the

pavement, dented by heavily-laden carts, was covered with mud; the thaw soaked the walls with an icy dampness, whilst all the filth and destitution brought terrible sadness to the heart.

After going as far as the Rue Marcadet, Pierre retraced his steps; and in the Rue des Saules, certain that he was not mistaken, he entered the courtyard of a kind of barracks or hospital, encompassed by three irregular buildings. This court was a quagmire, where filth must have accumulated during the two months of terrible frost; and now all was melting, and an abominable stench arose. The buildings were half falling, the gaping vestibules looked like cellar holes, strips of paper streaked the cracked and filthy window-panes, and vile rags hung about like flags of death. Inside a shanty which served as the door-keeper's abode Pierre only saw an infirm man rolled up in a tattered strip of what had once been a horse-cloth.

"You have an old workman named Laveuve here," said the priest. "Which staircase is it, which floor?"

The man did not answer, but opened his anxious eyes, like a scared idiot. The door-keeper, no doubt, was in the neighbourhood. For a moment the priest waited; then seeing a little girl on the other side of the courtyard, he risked himself, crossed the quagmire on tip-toe, and asked: "Do you know an old workman named Laveuve in the house, my child?"

The little girl, who only had a ragged gown of pink cotton stuff about her meagre figure, stood there shivering, her hands covered with chilblains. She raised her delicate face, which looked pretty

though nipped by the cold: "Laveuve," said she, "no, don't know, don't know." And with the unconscious gesture of a beggar child she put out one of her poor, numbed and disfigured hands. Then, when the priest had given her a little bit of silver, she began to prance through the mud like a joyful goat, singing the while in a shrill voice: "Don't know, don't know."

Pierre decided to follow her. She vanished into one of the gaping vestibules, and, in her rear, he climbed a dark and fetid staircase, whose steps were half-broken and so slippery, on account of the vegetable parings strewn over them, that he had to avail himself of the greasy rope by which the inmates hoisted themselves upwards. But every door was closed; he vainly knocked at several of them, and only elicited, at the last, a stifled growl, as though some despairing animal were confined within. Returning to the yard, he hesitated, then made his way to another staircase, where he was deafened by piercing cries, as of a child who is being butchered. He climbed on hearing this noise and at last found himself in front of an open room where an infant, who had been left alone, tied in his little chair, in order that he might not fall, was howling and howling without drawing breath. Then Pierre went down again, upset, frozen by the sight of so much destitution and abandonment.

But a woman was coming in, carrying three potatoes in her apron, and on being questioned by him she gazed distrustfully at his cassock. "Laveuve, Laveuve? I can't say," she replied. "If the door-keeper were there, she might be able to tell you. There

are five staircases, you see, and we don't all know each other. Besides, there are so many changes. Still try over there; at the far end."

The staircase at the back of the yard was yet more abominable than the others, its steps warped, its walls slimy, as if soaked with the sweat of anguish. At each successive floor the drains exhaled a pestilential stench, whilst from every lodging came moans, or a noise of quarrelling, or some frightful sign of misery. A door swung open, and a man appeared dragging a woman by the hair whilst three youngsters sobbed aloud. On the next floor, Pierre caught a glimpse of a room where a young girl in her teens, racked by coughing, was hastily carrying an infant to and fro to quiet it, in despair that all the milk of her breast should be exhausted. Then, in an adjoining lodging, came the poignant spectacle of three beings, half clad in shreds, apparently sexless and ageless, who, amidst the dire bareness of their room, were gluttonously eating from the same earthen pan some pottage which even dogs would have refused. They barely raised their heads to growl, and did not answer Pierre's questions.

He was about to go down again, when right atop of the stairs, at the entry of a passage, it occurred to him to make a last try by knocking at the door. It was opened by a woman whose uncombed hair was already getting grey, though she could not be more than forty; while her pale lips, and dim eyes set in a yellow countenance, expressed utter lassitude, the shrinking, the constant dread of one whom wretchedness has pitilessly assailed.

The sight of Pierre's cassock disturbed her, and she stammered anxiously: "Come in, come in, Monsieur l'Abbe."

However, a man whom Pierre had not at first seen – a workman also of some forty years, tall, thin and bald, with scanty moustache and beard of a washed-out reddish hue – made an angry gesture – a threat as it were – to turn the priest out of doors. But he calmed himself, sat down near a rickety table and pretended to turn his back. And as there was also a child present – a fair-haired girl, eleven or twelve years old, with a long and gentle face and that intelligent and somewhat aged expression which great misery imparts to children – he called her to him, and held her between his knees, doubtless to keep her away from the man in the cassock.

Pierre – whose heart was oppressed by his reception, and who realised the utter destitution of this family by the sight of the bare, fireless room, and the distressed mournfulness of its three inmates – decided all the same to repeat his question: "Madame, do you know an old workman named Laveuve in the house?"

The woman – who now trembled at having admitted him, since it seemed to displease her man – timidly tried to arrange matters. "Laveuve, Laveuve? no, I don't. But Salvat, you hear? Do you know a Laveuve here?"

Salvat merely shrugged his shoulders; but the little girl could not keep her tongue still: "I say, mamma Theodore, it's p'raps the Philosopher."

"A former house-painter," continued Pierre, "an old man who

is ill and past work."

Madame Theodore was at once enlightened. "In that case it's him, it's him. We call him the Philosopher, a nickname folks have given him in the neighbourhood. But there's nothing to prevent his real name from being Laveuve."

With one of his fists raised towards the ceiling, Salvat seemed to be protesting against the abomination of a world and a Providence that allowed old toilers to die of hunger just like broken-down beasts. However, he did not speak, but relapsed into the savage, heavy silence, the bitter meditation in which he had been plunged when the priest arrived. He was a journeyman engineer, and gazed obstinately at the table where lay his little leather tool-bag, bulging with something it contained – something, perhaps, which he had to take back to a work-shop. He might have been thinking of a long, enforced spell of idleness, of a vain search for any kind of work during the two previous months of that terrible winter. Or perhaps it was the coming bloody reprisals of the starvelings that occupied the fiery reverie which set his large, strange, vague blue eyes aglow. All at once he noticed that his daughter had taken up the tool-bag and was trying to open it to see what it might contain. At this he quivered and at last spoke, his voice kindly, yet bitter with sudden emotion, which made him turn pale. "Celine, you must leave that alone. I forbade you to touch my tools," said he; then taking the bag, he deposited it with great precaution against the wall behind him.

"And so, madame," asked Pierre, "this man Laveuve lives on

this floor?"

Madame Theodore directed a timid, questioning glance at Salvat. She was not in favour of hustling priests when they took the trouble to call, for at times there was a little money to be got from them. And when she realised that Salvat, who had once more relapsed into his black reverie, left her free to act as she pleased, she at once tendered her services. "If Monsieur l'Abbe is agreeable, I will conduct him. It's just at the end of the passage. But one must know the way, for there are still some steps to climb."

Celine, finding a pastime in this visit, escaped from her father's knees and likewise accompanied the priest. And Salvat remained alone in that den of poverty and suffering, injustice and anger, without a fire, without bread, haunted by his burning dream, his eyes again fixed upon his bag, as if there, among his tools, he possessed the wherewithal to heal the ailing world.

It indeed proved necessary to climb a few more steps; and then, following Madame Theodore and Celine, Pierre found himself in a kind of narrow garret under the roof, a loft a few yards square, where one could not stand erect. There was no window, only a skylight, and as the snow still covered it one had to leave the door wide open in order that one might see. And the thaw was entering the place, the melting snow was falling drop by drop, and coming over the tiled floor. After long weeks of intense cold, dark dampness rained quivering over all. And there, lacking even a chair, even a plank, Laveuve lay in a corner on a

little pile of filthy rags spread upon the bare tiles; he looked like some animal dying on a dung-heap.

"There!" said Celine in her sing-song voice, "there he is, that's the Philosopher!"

Madame Theodore had bent down to ascertain if he still lived. "Yes, he breathes; he's sleeping I think. Oh! if he only had something to eat every day, he would be well enough. But what would you have? He has nobody left him, and when one gets to seventy the best is to throw oneself into the river. In the house-painting line it often happens that a man has to give up working on ladders and scaffoldings at fifty. He at first found some work to do on the ground level. Then he was lucky enough to get a job as night watchman. But that's over, he's been turned away from everywhere, and, for two months now, he's been lying in this nook waiting to die. The landlord hasn't dared to fling him into the street as yet, though not for want of any inclination that way. We others sometimes bring him a little wine and a crust, of course; but when one has nothing oneself, how can one give to others?"

Pierre, terrified, gazed at that frightful remnant of humanity, that remnant into which fifty years of toil, misery and social injustice had turned a man. And he ended by distinguishing Laveuve's white, worn, sunken, deformed head. Here, on a human face, appeared all the ruin following upon hopeless labour. Laveuve's unkempt beard straggled over his features, suggesting an old horse that is no longer cropped; his toothless

jaws were quite askew, his eyes were vitreous, and his nose seemed to plunge into his mouth. But above all else one noticed his resemblance to some beast of burden, deformed by hard toil, lamed, worn to death, and now only good for the knackers.

"Ah! the poor fellow," muttered the shuddering priest. "And he is left to die of hunger, all alone, without any succour? And not a hospital, not an asylum has given him shelter?"

"Well," resumed Madame Theodore in her sad yet resigned voice, "the hospitals are built for the sick, and he isn't sick, he's simply finishing off, with his strength at an end. Besides he isn't always easy to deal with. People came again only lately to put him in an asylum, but he won't be shut up. And he speaks coarsely to those who question him, not to mention that he has the reputation of liking drink and talking badly about the gentle-folks. But, thank Heaven, he will now soon be delivered."

Pierre had leant forward on seeing Laveuve's eyes open, and he spoke to him tenderly, telling him that he had come from a friend with a little money to enable him to buy what he might most pressingly require. At first, on seeing Pierre's cassock, the old man had growled some coarse words; but, despite his extreme feebleness, he still retained the pert chaffing spirit of the Parisian artisan: "Well, then, I'll willingly drink a drop," he said distinctly, "and have a bit of bread with it, if there's the needful; for I've lost taste of both for a couple of days past."

Celine offered her services, and Madame Theodore sent her to fetch a loaf and a quart of wine with Abbe Rose's money.

And in the interval she told Pierre how Laveuve was at one moment to have entered the Asylum of the Invalids of Labour, a charitable enterprise whose lady patronesses were presided over by Baroness Duvillard. However, the usual regulation inquiries had doubtless led to such an unfavourable report that matters had gone no further.

"Baroness Duvillard! but I know her, and will go to see her to-day!" exclaimed Pierre, whose heart was bleeding. "It is impossible for a man to be left in such circumstances any longer."

Then, as Celine came back with the loaf and the wine, the three of them tried to make Laveuve more comfortable, raised him on his heap of rags, gave him to eat and to drink, and then left the remainder of the wine and the loaf – a large four-pound loaf – near him, recommending him to wait awhile before he finished the bread, as otherwise he might stifle.

"Monsieur l'Abbe ought to give me his address in case I should have any news to send him," said Madame Theodore when she again found herself at her door.

Pierre had no card with him, and so all three went into the room. But Salvat was no longer alone there. He stood talking in a low voice very quickly, and almost mouth to mouth, with a young fellow of twenty. The latter, who was slim and dark, with a sprouting beard and hair cut in brush fashion, had bright eyes, a straight nose and thin lips set in a pale and slightly freckled face, betokening great intelligence. With stern and stubborn brow, he stood shivering in his well-worn jacket.

"Monsieur l'Abbe wants to leave me his address for the Philosopher's affair," gently explained Madame Theodore, annoyed to find another there with Salvat.

The two men had glanced at the priest and then looked at one another, each with terrible mien. And they suddenly ceased speaking in the bitter cold which fell from the ceiling. Then, again with infinite precaution, Salvat went to take his tool-bag from alongside the wall.

"So you are going down, you are again going to look for work?" asked Madame Theodore.

He did not answer, but merely made an angry gesture, as if to say that he would no longer have anything to do with work since work for so long a time had not cared to have anything to do with him.

"All the same," resumed the woman, "try to bring something back with you, for you know there's nothing. At what time will you be back?"

With another gesture he seemed to answer that he would come back when he could, perhaps never. And tears rising, despite all his efforts, to his vague, blue, glowing eyes he caught hold of his daughter Celine, kissed her violently, distractedly, and then went off, with his bag under his arm, followed by his young companion.

"Celine," resumed Madame Theodore, "give Monsieur l'Abbe your pencil, and, see, monsieur, seat yourself here, it will be better for writing."

Then, when Pierre had installed himself at the table, on the chair previously occupied by Salvat, she went on talking, seeking to excuse her man for his scanty politeness: "He hasn't a bad heart, but he's had so many worries in life that he has become a bit cracked. It's like that young man whom you just saw here, Monsieur Victor Mathis. There's another for you, who isn't happy, a young man who was well brought up, who has a lot of learning, and whose mother, a widow, has only just got the wherewithal to buy bread. So one can understand it, can't one? It all upsets their heads, and they talk of blowing up everybody. For my part those are not my notions, but I forgive them, oh! willingly enough."

Perturbed, yet interested by all the mystery and vague horror which he could divine around him, Pierre made no haste to write his address, but lingered listening, as if inviting confidence.

"If you only knew, Monsieur l'Abbe, that poor Salvat was a forsaken child, without father or mother, and had to scour the roads and try every trade at first to get a living. Then afterwards he became a mechanician, and a very good workman, I assure you, very skilful and very painstaking. But he already had those ideas of his, and quarrelled with people, and tried to bring his mates over to his views; and so he was unable to stay anywhere. At last, when he was thirty, he was stupid enough to go to America with an inventor, who traded on him to such a point that after six years of it he came back ill and penniless. I must tell you that he had married my younger sister Leonie, and that she died

before he went to America, leaving him little Celine, who was then only a year old. I was then living with my husband, Theodore Labitte, a mason; and it's not to brag that I say it, but however much I wore out my eyes with needlework he used to beat me till he left me half-dead on the floor. But he ended by deserting me and going off with a young woman of twenty, which, after all, caused me more pleasure than grief. And naturally when Salvat came back he sought me out and found me alone with his little Celine, whom he had left in my charge when he went away, and who called me mamma. And we've all three been living together since then – "

She became somewhat embarrassed, and then, as if to show that she did not altogether lack some respectable family connections, she went on to say: "For my part I've had no luck; but I've another sister, Hortense, who's married to a clerk, Monsieur Chretiennot, and lives in a pretty lodging on the Boulevard Rochechouart. There were three of us born of my father's second marriage, – Hortense, who's the youngest, Leonie, who's dead, and myself, Pauline, the eldest. And of my father's first marriage I've still a brother Eugene Toussaint, who is ten years older than me and is an engineer like Salvat, and has been working ever since the war in the same establishment, the Grandidier factory, only a hundred steps away in the Rue Marcadet. The misfortune is that he had a stroke lately. As for me, my eyes are done for; I ruined them by working ten hours a day at fine needlework. And now I can no longer even try to mend

anything without my eyes filling with water till I can't see at all. I've tried to find charwoman's work, but I can't get any; bad luck always follows us. And so we are in need of everything; we've nothing but black misery, two or three days sometimes going by without a bite, so that it's like the chance life of a dog that feeds on what it can find. And with these last two months of bitter cold to freeze us, it's sometimes made us think that one morning we should never wake up again. But what would you have? I've never been happy, I was beaten to begin with, and now I'm done for, left in a corner, living on, I really don't know why."

Her voice had begun to tremble, her red eyes moistened, and Pierre could realise that she thus wept through life, a good enough woman but one who had no will, and was already blotted out, so to say, from existence.

"Oh! I don't complain of Salvat," she went on. "He's a good fellow; he only dreams of everybody's happiness, and he doesn't drink, and he works when he can. Only it's certain that he'd work more if he didn't busy himself with politics. One can't discuss things with comrades, and go to public meetings and be at the workshop at the same time. In that he's at fault, that's evident. But all the same he has good reason to complain, for one can't imagine such misfortunes as have pursued him. Everything has fallen on him, everything has beaten him down. Why, a saint even would have gone mad, so that one can understand that a poor beggar who has never had any luck should get quite wild. For the last two months he has only met one good

heart, a learned gentleman who lives up yonder on the height, Monsieur Guillaume Froment, who has given him a little work, just something to enable us to have some soup now and then."

Much surprised by this mention of his brother, Pierre wished to ask certain questions; but a singular feeling of uneasiness, in which fear and discretion mingled, checked his tongue. He looked at Celine, who stood before him, listening in silence with her grave, delicate air; and Madame Theodore, seeing him smile at the child, indulged in a final remark: "It's just the idea of that child," said she, "that throws Salvat out of his wits. He adores her, and he'd kill everybody if he could, when he sees her go supperless to bed. She's such a good girl, she was learning so nicely at the Communal School! But now she hasn't even a shift to go there in."

Pierre, who had at last written his address, slipped a five-franc piece into the little girl's hand, and, desirous as he was of curtailing any thanks, he hastily said: "You will know now where to find me if you need me for Laveuve. But I'm going to busy myself about him this very afternoon, and I really hope that he will be fetched away this evening."

Madame Theodore did not listen, but poured forth all possible blessings; whilst Celine, thunderstruck at seeing five francs in her hand, murmured: "Oh! that poor papa, who has gone to hunt for money! Shall I run after him to tell him that we've got enough for to-day?"

Then the priest, who was already in the passage, heard the

woman answer: "Oh! he's far away if he's still walking. He'll p'raps come back right enough."

However, as Pierre, with buzzing head and grief-stricken heart, hastily escaped out of that frightful house of suffering, he perceived to his astonishment Salvat and Victor Mathis standing erect in a corner of the filthy courtyard, where the stench was so pestilential. They had come downstairs, there to continue their interrupted colloquy. And again, they were talking in very low tones, and very quickly, mouth to mouth, absorbed in the violent thoughts which made their eyes flare. But they heard the priest's footsteps, recognised him, and suddenly becoming cold and calm, exchanged an energetic hand-shake without uttering another word. Victor went up towards Montmartre, whilst Salvat hesitated like a man who is consulting destiny. Then, as if trusting himself to stern chance, drawing up his thin figure, the figure of a weary, hungry toiler, he turned into the Rue Marcadet, and walked towards Paris, his tool-bag still under his arm.

For an instant Pierre felt a desire to run and call to him that his little girl wished him to go back again. But the same feeling of uneasiness as before came over the priest – a commingling of discretion and fear, a covert conviction that nothing could stay destiny. And he himself was no longer calm, no longer experienced the icy, despairing distress of the early morning. On finding himself again in the street, amidst the quivering fog, he felt the fever, the glow of charity which the sight of such frightful wretchedness had ignited, once more within him. No,

no! such suffering was too much; he wished to struggle still, to save Laveuve and restore a little joy to all those poor folk. The new experiment presented itself with that city of Paris which he had seen shrouded as with ashes, so mysterious and so perturbing beneath the threat of inevitable justice. And he dreamed of a huge sun bringing health and fruitfulness, which would make of the huge city the fertile field where would sprout the better world of to-morrow.

II

WEALTH AND WORLDLINESS

THAT same morning, as was the case nearly every day, some intimates were expected to *dejeuner* at the Duvillards', a few friends who more or less invited themselves. And on that chilly day, all thaw and fog, the regal mansion in the Rue Godot-de-Mauroy near the Boulevard de la Madeleine bloomed with the rarest flowers, for flowers were the greatest passion of the Baroness, who transformed the lofty, sumptuous rooms, littered with marvels, into warm and odoriferous conservatories, whither the gloomy, livid light of Paris penetrated caressingly with infinite softness.

The great reception rooms were on the ground-floor looking on to the spacious courtyard, and preceded by a little winter garden, which served as a vestibule where two footmen in liveries of dark green and gold were invariably on duty. A famous gallery of paintings, valued at millions of francs, occupied the whole of the northern side of the house. And the grand staircase, of a sumptuousness which also was famous, conducted to the apartments usually occupied by the family, a large red drawing-room, a small blue and silver drawing-room, a study whose walls were hung with old stamped leather, and a dining-room in pale green with English furniture, not to mention the various bedchambers and dressing-rooms. Built in

the time of Louis XIV. the mansion retained an aspect of noble grandeur, subordinated to the epicurean tastes of the triumphant *bourgeoisie*, which for a century now had reigned by virtue of the omnipotence of money.

Noon had not yet struck, and Baron Duvillard, contrary to custom, found himself the first in the little blue and silver *salon*. He was a man of sixty, tall and sturdy, with a large nose, full cheeks, broad, fleshy lips, and wolfish teeth, which had remained very fine. He had, however, become bald at an early age, and dyed the little hair that was left him. Moreover, since his beard had turned white, he had kept his face clean-shaven. His grey eyes bespoke his audacity, and in his laugh there was a ring of conquest, while the whole of his face expressed the fact that this conquest was his own, that he wielded the sovereignty of an unscrupulous master, who used and abused the power stolen and retained by his caste.

He took a few steps, and then halted in front of a basket of wonderful orchids near the window. On the mantel-piece and table tufts of violets sent forth their perfume, and in the warm, deep silence which seemed to fall from the hangings, the Baron sat down and stretched himself in one of the large armchairs, upholstered in blue satin striped with silver. He had taken a newspaper from his pocket, and began to re-peruse an article it contained, whilst all around him the entire mansion proclaimed his immense fortune, his sovereign power, the whole history of the century which had made him the master. His grandfather,

Jerome Duvillard, son of a petty advocate of Poitou, had come to Paris as a notary's clerk in 1788, when he was eighteen; and very keen, intelligent and hungry as he was, he had gained the family's first three millions – at first in trafficking with the *emigres'*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.