

ÉMILE ZOLA

THE THREE CITIES
TRILOGY: ROME,
VOLUME 5

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The Three Cities Trilogy: Rome, Volume 5:

Содержание

PART V	4
XIV	4
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51

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PART V

XIV

THAT evening, when Pierre emerged from the Borgo in front of the Vatican, a sonorous stroke rang out from the clock amidst the deep silence of the dark and sleepy district. It was only half-past eight, and being in advance the young priest resolved to wait some twenty minutes in order to reach the doors of the papal apartments precisely at nine, the hour fixed for his audience.

This respite brought him some relief amidst the infinite emotion and grief which gripped his heart. That tragic afternoon which he had spent in the chamber of death, where Dario and Benedetta now slept the eternal sleep in one another's arms, had left him very weary. He was haunted by a wild, dolorous vision of the two lovers, and involuntary sighs came from his lips whilst tears continually moistened his eyes. He had been altogether unable to eat that evening. Ah! how he would have liked to hide

himself and weep at his ease! His heart melted at each fresh thought. The pitiful death of the lovers intensified the grievous feeling with which his book was instinct, and impelled him to yet greater compassion, a perfect anguish of charity for all who suffered in the world. And he was so distracted by the thought of the many physical and moral sores of Paris and of Rome, where he had beheld so much unjust and abominable suffering, that at each step he took he feared lest he should burst into sobs with arms upstretched towards the blackness of heaven.

In the hope of somewhat calming himself he began to walk slowly across the Piazza of St. Peter's, now all darkness and solitude. On arriving he had fancied that he was losing himself in a murky sea, but by degrees his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness. The vast expanse was only lighted by the four candelabra at the corners of the obelisk and by infrequent lamps skirting the buildings which run on either hand towards the Basilica. Under the colonnade, too, other lamps threw yellow gleams across the forest of pillars, showing up their stone trunks in fantastic fashion; while on the piazza only the pale, ghostly obelisk was at all distinctly visible. Pierre could scarcely perceive the dim, silent facade of St. Peter's; whilst of the dome he merely divined a gigantic, bluey roundness faintly shadowed against the sky. In the obscurity he at first heard the plashing of the fountains without being at all able to see them, but on approaching he at last distinguished the slender phantoms of the ever rising jets which fell again in spray. And above the vast square stretched the vast

and moonless sky of a deep velvety blue, where the stars were large and radiant like carbuncles; Charles's Wain, with golden wheels and golden shaft tilted back as it were, over the roof of the Vatican, and Orion, bedizened with the three bright stars of his belt, showing magnificently above Rome, in the direction of the Via Giulia.

At last Pierre raised his eyes to the Vatican, but facing the piazza there was here merely a confused jumble of walls, amidst which only two gleams of light appeared on the floor of the papal apartments. The Court of San Damaso was, however, lighted, for the conservatory-like glass-work of two of its sides sparkled as with the reflection of gas lamps which could not be seen. For a time there was not a sound or sign of movement, but at last two persons crossed the expanse of the piazza, and then came a third who in his turn disappeared, nothing remaining but a rhythmical far-away echo of steps. The spot was indeed a perfect desert, there were neither promenaders nor passers-by, nor was there even the shadow of a prowler in the pillared forest of the colonnade, which was as empty as the wild primeval forests of the world's infancy. And what a solemn desert it was, full of the silence of haughty desolation. Never had so vast and black a presentment of slumber, so instinct with the sovereign nobility of death, appeared to Pierre.

At ten minutes to nine he at last made up his mind and went towards the bronze portal. Only one of the folding doors was now open at the end of the right-hand porticus, where the

increasing density of the gloom steeped everything in night. Pierre remembered the instructions which Monsignor Nani had given him; at each door that he reached he was to ask for Signor Squadra without adding a word, and thereupon each door would open and he would have nothing to do but to let himself be guided on. No one but the prelate now knew that he was there, since Benedetta, the only being to whom he had confided the secret, was dead. When he had crossed the threshold of the bronze doors and found himself in presence of the motionless, sleeping Swiss Guard, who was on duty there, he simply spoke the words agreed upon: "Signor Squadra." And as the Guard did not stir, did not seek to bar his way, he passed on, turning into the vestibule of the Scala Pia, the stone stairway which ascends to the Court of San Damaso. And not a soul was to be seen: there was but the faint sound of his own light footsteps and the sleepy glow of the gas jets whose light was softly whitened by globes of frosted glass. Up above, on reaching the courtyard he found it a solitude, whose slumber seemed sepulchral amidst the mournful gleams of the gas lamps which cast a pallid reflection on the lofty glass-work of the facades. And feeling somewhat nervous, affected by the quiver which pervaded all that void and silence, Pierre hastened on, turning to the right, towards the low flight of steps which leads to the staircase of the Pope's private apartments.

Here stood a superb gendarme in full uniform. "Signor Squadra," said Pierre, and without a word the gendarme pointed to the stairs.

The young man went up. It was a broad stairway, with low steps, balustrade of white marble, and walls covered with yellowish stucco. The gas, burning in globes of round glass, seemed to have been already turned down in a spirit of prudent economy. And in the glimmering light nothing could have been more mournfully solemn than that cold and pallid staircase. On each landing there was a Swiss Guard, halbard in hand, and in the heavy slumber spreading through the palace one only heard the regular monotonous footsteps of these men, ever marching up and down, in order no doubt that they might not succumb to the benumbing influence of their surroundings.

Amidst the invading dimness and the quivering silence the ascent of the stairs seemed interminable to Pierre, who by the time he reached the second-floor landing imagined that he had been climbing for ages. There, outside the glass door of the Sala Clementina, only the right-hand half of which was open, a last Swiss Guard stood watching.

"Signor Squadra," Pierre said again, and the Guard drew back to let him pass.

The Sala Clementina, spacious enough by daylight, seemed immense at that nocturnal hour, in the twilight glimmer of its lamps. All the opulent decorative-work, sculpture, painting, and gilding became blended, the walls assuming a tawny vagueness amidst which appeared bright patches like the sparkle of precious stones. There was not an article of furniture, nothing but the endless pavement stretching away into the semi-darkness. At

last, however, near a door at the far end Pierre espied some men dozing on a bench. They were three Swiss Guards. "Signor Squadra," he said to them.

One of the Guards thereupon slowly rose and left the hall, and Pierre understood that he was to wait. He did not dare to move, disturbed as he was by the sound of his own footsteps on the paved floor, so he contented himself with gazing around and picturing the crowds which at times peopled that vast apartment, the first of the many papal ante-chambers. But before long the Guard returned, and behind him, on the threshold of the adjoining room, appeared a man of forty or thereabouts, who was clad in black from head to foot and suggested a cross between a butler and a beadle. He had a good-looking, clean-shaven face, with somewhat pronounced nose and large, clear, fixed eyes. "Signor Squadra," said Pierre for the last time.

The man bowed as if to say that he was Signor Squadra, and then, with a fresh reverence, he invited the priest to follow him. Thereupon at a leisurely step, one behind the other, they began to thread the interminable suite of waiting-rooms. Pierre, who was acquainted with the ceremonial, of which he had often spoken with Narcisse, recognised the different apartments as he passed through them, recalling their names and purpose, and peopling them in imagination with the various officials of the papal retinue who have the right to occupy them. These according to their rank cannot go beyond certain doors, so that the persons who are to have audience of the Pope are passed on

from the servants to the Noble Guards, from the Noble Guards to the honorary /Camerieri/, and from the latter to the /Camerieri segreti/, until they at last reach the presence of the Holy Father. At eight o'clock, however, the ante-rooms empty and become both deserted and dim, only a few lamps being left alight upon the pier tables standing here and there against the walls.

And first Pierre came to the ante-room of the /bussolanti/, mere ushers clad in red velvet broidered with the papal arms, who conduct visitors to the door of the ante-room of honour. At that late hour only one of them was left there, seated on a bench in such a dark corner that his purple tunic looked quite black. Then the Hall of the Gendarmes was crossed, where according to the regulations the secretaries of cardinals and other high personages await their masters' return; and this was now completely empty, void both of the handsome blue uniforms with white shoulder belts and the cassocks of fine black cloth which mingled in it during the brilliant reception hours. Empty also was the following room, a smaller one reserved to the Palatine Guards, who are recruited among the Roman middle class and wear black tunics with gold epaulets and shakoes surmounted by red plumes. Then Pierre and his guide turned into another series of apartments, and again was the first one empty. This was the Hall of the Arras, a superb waiting-room with lofty painted ceiling and admirable Gobelins tapestry designed by Audran and representing the miracles of Jesus. And empty also was the ante-chamber of the Noble Guards which followed, with its wooden

stools, its pier table on the right-hand surmounted by a large crucifix standing between two lamps, and its large door opening at the far end into another but smaller room, a sort of alcove indeed, where there is an altar at which the Holy Father says mass by himself whilst those privileged to be present remain kneeling on the marble slabs of the outer apartment which is resplendent with the dazzling uniforms of the Guards. And empty likewise was the ensuing ante-room of honour, otherwise the grand throne-room, where the Pope receives two or three hundred people at a time in public audience. The throne, an arm-chair of elaborate pattern, gilded, and upholstered with red velvet, stands under a velvet canopy of the same hue, in front of the windows. Beside it is the cushion on which the Pope rests his foot in order that it may be kissed. Then facing one another, right and left of the room, there are two pier tables, on one of which is a clock and on the other a crucifix between lofty candelabra with feet of gilded wood. The wall hangings, of red silk damask with a Louis XIV palm pattern, are topped by a pompous frieze, framing a ceiling decorated with allegorical figures and attributes, and it is only just in front of the throne that a Smyrna carpet covers the magnificent marble pavement. On the days of private audience, when the Pope remains in the little throne-room or at times in his bed-chamber, the grand throne-room becomes simply the ante-room of honour, where high dignitaries of the Church, ambassadors, and great civilian personages, wait their turns. Two /Camerieri/, one in violet coat,

the other of the Cape and the Sword, here do duty, receiving from the /bussolanti/ the persons who are to be honoured with audiences and conducting them to the door of the next room, the secret or private ante-chamber, where they hand them over to the /Camerieri segreti/.

Signor Squadra who, walking on with slow and silent steps, had not yet once turned round, paused for a moment on reaching the door of the /anticamera segreta/ so as to give Pierre time to breathe and recover himself somewhat before crossing the threshold of the sanctuary. The /Camerieri segreti/ alone had the right to occupy that last ante-chamber, and none but the cardinals might wait there till the Pope should condescend to receive them. And so when Signor Squadra made up his mind to admit Pierre, the latter could not restrain a slight nervous shiver as if he were passing into some redoubtable mysterious sphere beyond the limits of the lower world. In the daytime a Noble Guard stood on sentry duty before the door, but the latter was now free of access, and the room within proved as empty as all the others. It was rather narrow, almost like a passage, with two windows overlooking the new district of the castle fields and a third one facing the Piazza of St. Peter's. Near the last was a door conducting to the little throne-room, and between this door and the window stood a small table at which a secretary, now absent, usually sat. And here again, as in all the other rooms, one found a gilded pier table surmounted by a crucifix flanked by a pair of lamps. In a corner too there was a large clock, loudly

ticking in its ebony case incrustated with brass-work. Still there was nothing to awaken curiosity under the panelled and gilded ceiling unless it were the wall-hangings of red damask, on which yellow scutcheons displaying the Keys and the Tiara alternated with armorial lions, each with a paw resting on a globe.

Signor Squadra, however, now noticed that Pierre still carried his hat in his hand, whereas according to etiquette he should have left it in the hall of the /bussolanti/, only cardinals being privileged to carry their hats with them into the Pope's presence. Accordingly he discreetly took the young priest's from him, and deposited it on the pier table to indicate that it must at least remain there. Then, without a word, by a simple bow he gave Pierre to understand that he was about to announce him to his Holiness, and that he must be good enough to wait for a few minutes in that room.

On being left to himself Pierre drew a long breath. He was stifling; his heart was beating as though it would burst. Nevertheless his mind remained clear, and in spite of the semi-obscurity he had been able to form some idea of the famous and magnificent apartments of the Pope, a suite of splendid /salons/ with tapestried or silken walls, gilded or painted friezes, and frescoed ceilings. By way of furniture, however, there were only pier table, stools,¹ and thrones. And the lamps and the

¹ M. Zola seems to have fallen into error here. Many of the seats, which are of peculiar antique design, do, in the lower part, resemble stools, but they have backs, whereas a stool proper has none. Briefly, these seats, which are entirely of wood, are not unlike certain old-fashioned hall chairs. — Trans.

clocks, and the crucifixes, even the thrones, were all presents brought from the four quarters of the world in the great fervent days of jubilee. There was no sign of comfort, everything was pompous, stiff, cold, and inconvenient. All olden Italy was there, with its perpetual display and lack of intimate, cosy life. It had been necessary to lay a few carpets over the superb marble slabs which froze one's feet; and some /caloriferes/ had even lately been installed, but it was not thought prudent to light them lest the variations of temperature should give the Pope a cold. However, that which more particularly struck Pierre now that he stood there waiting was the extraordinary silence which prevailed all around, silence so deep that it seemed as if all the dark quiescence of that huge, somniferous Vatican were concentrated in that one suite of lifeless, sumptuous rooms, which the motionless flamelets of the lamps as dimly illuminated.

All at once the ebony clock struck nine and the young man felt astonished. What! had only ten minutes elapsed since he had crossed the threshold of the bronze doors below? He felt as if he had been walking on for days and days. Then, desiring to overcome the nervous feeling which oppressed him – for he ever feared lest his enforced calmness should collapse amidst a flood of tears – he began to walk up and down, passing in front of the clock, glancing at the crucifix on the pier table, and the globe of the lamp on which had remained the mark of a servant's greasy fingers. And the light was so faint and yellow that he felt inclined to turn the lamp up, but did not dare. Then he found

himself with his brow resting against one of the panes of the window facing the Piazza of St. Peter's, and for a moment he was thunderstruck, for between the imperfectly closed shutters he could see all Rome, as he had seen it one day from the /loggie/ of Raffaele, and as he had pictured Leo XIII contemplating it from the window of his bed-room. However, it was now Rome by night, Rome spreading out into the depths of the gloom, as limitless as the starry sky. And in that sea of black waves one could only with certainty identify the larger thoroughfares which the white brightness of electric lights turned, as it were, into Milky Ways. All the rest showed but a swarming of little yellow sparks, the crumbs, as it were, of a half-extinguished heaven swept down upon the earth. Occasional constellations of bright stars, tracing mysterious figures, vainly endeavoured to show forth distinctly, but they were submerged, blotted out by the general chaos which suggested the dust of some old planet that had crumbled there, losing its splendour and reduced to mere phosphorescent sand. And how immense was the blackness thus sprinkled with light, how huge the mass of obscurity and mystery into which the Eternal City with its seven and twenty centuries, its ruins, its monuments, its people, its history seemed to have been merged. You could no longer tell where it began or where it ended, whether it spread to the farthest recesses of the gloom, or whether it were so reduced that the sun on rising would illumine but a little pile of ashes.

However, in spite of all Pierre's efforts, his nervous anguish

increased each moment, even in presence of that ocean of darkness which displayed such sovereign quiescence. He drew away from the window and quivered from head to foot on hearing a faint footfall and thinking it was that of Signor Squadra approaching to fetch him. The sound came from an adjacent apartment, the little throne-room, whose door, he now perceived, had remained ajar. And at last, as he heard nothing further, he yielded to his feverish impatience and peeped into this room which he found to be fairly spacious, again hung with red damask, and containing a gilded arm-chair, covered with red velvet under a canopy of the same material. And again there was the inevitable pier table, with a tall ivory crucifix, a clock, a pair of lamps, a pair of candelabra, a pair of large vases on pedestals, and two smaller ones of Sevres manufacture decorated with the Holy Father's portrait. At the same time, however, the room displayed rather more comfort, for a Smyrna carpet covered the whole of the marble floor, while a few arm-chairs stood against the walls, and an imitation chimney-piece, draped with damask, served as counterpart to the pier table. As a rule the Pope, whose bed-chamber communicated with this little throne-room, received in the latter such persons as he desired to honour. And Pierre's shiver became more pronounced at the idea that in all likelihood he would merely have the throne-room to cross and that Leo XIII was yonder behind its farther door. Why was he kept waiting, he wondered? He had been told of mysterious audiences granted at a similar hour to personages

who had been received in similar silent fashion, great personages whose names were only mentioned in the lowest whispers. With regard to himself no doubt, it was because he was considered compromising that there was a desire to receive him in this manner unknown to the personages of the Court, and so as to speak with him at ease. Then, all at once, he understood the cause of the noise he had recently heard, for beside the lamp on the pier table of the little throne-room he saw a kind of butler's tray containing some soiled plates, knives, forks, and spoons, with a bottle and a glass, which had evidently just been removed from a supper table. And he realised that Signor Squadra, having seen these things in the Pope's room, had brought them there, and had then gone in again, perhaps to tidy up. He knew also of the Pope's frugality, how he took his meals all alone at a little round table, everything being brought to him in that tray, a plate of meat, a plate of vegetables, a little Bordeaux claret as prescribed by his doctor, and a large allowance of beef broth of which he was very fond. In the same way as others might offer a cup of tea, he was wont to offer cups of broth to the old cardinals his friends and favourites, quite an invigorating little treat which these old bachelors much enjoyed. And, O ye orgies of Alexander VI, ye banquets and /galas/ of Julius II and Leo X, only eight /lire/ a day – six shillings and fourpence – were allowed to defray the cost of Leo XIII's table! However, just as that recollection occurred to Pierre, he again heard a slight noise, this time in his Holiness's bed-chamber, and thereupon, terrified

by his indiscretion, he hastened to withdraw from the entrance of the throne-room which, lifeless and quiescent though it was, seemed in his agitation to flare as with sudden fire.

Then, quivering too violently to be able to remain still, he began to walk up and down the ante-chamber. He remembered that Narcisse had spoken to him of that Signor Squadra, his Holiness's cherished valet, whose importance and influence were so great. He alone, on reception days, was able to prevail on the Pope to don a clean cassock if the one he was wearing happened to be soiled by snuff. And though his Holiness stubbornly shut himself up alone in his bed-room every night from a spirit of independence, which some called the anxiety of a miser determined to sleep alone with his treasure, Signor Squadra at all events occupied an adjoining chamber, and was ever on the watch, ready to respond to the faintest call. Again, it was he who respectfully intervened whenever his Holiness sat up too late or worked too long. But on this point it was difficult to induce the Pope to listen to reason. During his hours of insomnia he would often rise and send Squadra to fetch a secretary in order that he might detail some memoranda or sketch out an encyclical letter. When the drafting of one of the latter impassioned him he would have spent days and nights over it, just as formerly, when claiming proficiency in Latin verse, he had often let the dawn surprise him whilst he was polishing a line. But, indeed, he slept very little, his brain ever being at work, ever scheming out the realisation of some former ideas. His memory alone seemed to

have slightly weakened during recent times.

Pierre, as he slowly paced to and fro, gradually became absorbed in his thoughts of that lofty and sovereign personality. From the petty details of the Pope's daily existence, he passed to his intellectual life, to the /role/ which he was certainly bent on playing as a great pontiff. And Pierre asked himself which of his two hundred and fifty-seven predecessors, the long line of saints and criminals, men of mediocrity and men of genius, he most desired to resemble. Was it one of the first humble popes, those who followed on during the first three centuries, mere heads of burial guilds, fraternal pastors of the Christian community? Was it Pope Damasus, the first great builder, the man of letters who took delight in intellectual matters, the ardent believer who is said to have opened the Catacombs to the piety of the faithful? Was it Leo III, who by crowning Charlemagne boldly consummated the rupture with the schismatic East and conveyed the Empire to the West by the all-powerful will of God and His Church, which thenceforth disposed of the crowns of monarchs? Was it the terrible Gregory VII, the purifier of the temple, the sovereign of kings; was it Innocent III or Boniface VIII, those masters of souls, nations, and thrones, who, armed with the fierce weapon of excommunication, reigned with such despotism over the terrified middle ages that Catholicism was never nearer the attainment of its dream of universal dominion? Was it Urban II or Gregory IX or another of those popes in whom flared the red Crusading passion which urged the nations on to

the conquest of the unknown and the divine? Was it Alexander III, who defended the Holy See against the Empire, and at last conquered and set his foot on the neck of Frederick Barbarossa? Was it, long after the sorrows of Avignon, Julius II, who wore the cuirass and once more strengthened the political power of the papacy? Was it Leo X, the pompous, glorious patron of the Renaissance, of a whole great century of art, whose mind, however, was possessed of so little penetration and foresight that he looked on Luther as a mere rebellious monk? Was it Pius V, who personified dark and avenging reaction, the fire of the stakes that punished the heretic world? Was it some other of the popes who reigned after the Council of Trent with faith absolute, belief re-established in its full integrity, the Church saved by pride and the stubborn upholding of every dogma? Or was it a pope of the decline, such as Benedict XIV, the man of vast intelligence, the learned theologian who, as his hands were tied, and he could not dispose of the kingdoms of the world, spent a worthy life in regulating the affairs of heaven?

In this wise, in Pierre's mind there spread out the whole history of the popes, the most prodigious of all histories, showing fortune in every guise, the lowest, the most wretched, as well as the loftiest and most dazzling; whilst an obstinate determination to live enabled the papacy to survive everything – conflagrations, massacres, and the downfall of many nations, for always did it remain militant and erect in the persons of its popes, that most extraordinary of all lines of absolute, conquering, and

domineering sovereigns, every one of them – even the puny and humble – masters of the world, every one of them glorious with the imperishable glory of heaven when they were thus evoked in that ancient Vatican, where their spirits assuredly awoke at night and prowled about the endless galleries and spreading halls in that tomb-like silence whose quiver came no doubt from the light touch of their gliding steps over the marble slabs.

However, Pierre was now thinking that he indeed knew which of the great popes Leo XIII most desired to resemble. It was first Gregory the Great, the conqueror and organiser of the early days of Catholic power. He had come of ancient Roman stock, and in his heart there was a little of the blood of the emperors. He administered Rome after it had been saved from the Goths, cultivated the ecclesiastical domains, and divided earthly wealth into thirds, one for the poor, one for the clergy, and one for the Church. Then too he was the first to establish the Propaganda, sending his priests forth to civilise and pacify the nations, and carrying his conquests so far as to win Great Britain over to the divine law of Christ. And the second pope whom Leo XIII took as model was one who had arisen after a long lapse of centuries, Sixtus V, the pope financier and politician, the vine-dresser's son, who, when he had donned the tiara, revealed one of the most extensive and supple minds of a period fertile in great diplomatists. He heaped up treasure and displayed stern avarice, in order that he might ever have in his coffers all the money needful for war or for peace. He spent years and years

in negotiations with kings, never despairing of his own triumph; and never did he display open hostility for his times, but took them as they were and then sought to modify them in accordance with the interests of the Holy See, showing himself conciliatory in all things and with every one, already dreaming of an European balance of power which he hoped to control. And withal a very saintly pope, a fervent mystic, yet a pope of the most absolute and domineering mind blended with a politician ready for whatever courses might most conduce to the rule of God's Church on earth.

And, after all, Pierre amidst his rising enthusiasm, which despite his efforts at calmness was sweeping away all prudence and doubt, Pierre asked himself why he need question the past. Was not Leo XIII the pope whom he had depicted in his book, the great pontiff, who was desired and expected? No doubt the portrait which he had sketched was not accurate in every detail, but surely its main lines must be correct if mankind were to retain a hope of salvation. Whole pages of that book of his arose before him, and he again beheld the Leo XIII that he had portrayed, the wise and conciliatory politician, labouring for the unity of the Church and so anxious to make it strong and invincible against the day of the inevitable great struggle. He again beheld him freed from the cares of the temporal power, elevated, radiant with moral splendour, the only authority left erect above the nations; he beheld him realising what mortal danger would be incurred if the solution of the social question were left to the enemies of Christianity, and therefore resolving to intervene in

contemporary quarrels for the defence of the poor and the lowly, even as Jesus had intervened once before. And he again beheld him putting himself on the side of the democracies, accepting the Republic in France, leaving the dethroned kings in exile, and verifying the prediction which promised the empire of the world to Rome once more when the papacy should have unified belief and have placed itself at the head of the people. The times indeed were near accomplishment, Caesar was struck down, the Pope alone remained, and would not the people, the great silent multitude, for whom the two powers had so long contended, give itself to its Father now that it knew him to be both just and charitable, with heart aglow and hand outstretched to welcome all the penniless toilers and beggars of the roads! Given the catastrophe which threatened our rotten modern societies, the frightful misery which ravaged every city, there was surely no other solution possible: Leo XIII, the predestined, necessary redeemer, the pastor sent to save the flock from coming disaster by re-establishing the true Christian community, the forgotten golden age of primitive Christianity. The reign of justice would at last begin, all men would be reconciled, there would be but one nation living in peace and obeying the equalising law of work, under the high patronage of the Pope, sole bond of charity and love on earth!

And at this thought Pierre was upbuoyed by fiery enthusiasm. At last he was about to see the Holy Father, empty his heart and open his soul to him! He had so long and so passionately looked

for the advent of that moment! To secure it he had fought with all his courage through ever recurring obstacles, and the length and difficulty of the struggle and the success now at last achieved, increased his feverishness, his desire for final victory. Yes, yes, he would conquer, he would confound his enemies. As he had said to Monsignor Fornaro, could the Pope disavow him? Had he not expressed the Holy Father's secret ideas? Perhaps he might have done so somewhat prematurely, but was not that a fault to be forgiven? And then too, he remembered his declaration to Monsignor Nani, that he himself would never withdraw and suppress his book, for he neither regretted nor disowned anything that was in it. At this very moment he again questioned himself, and felt that all his valour and determination to defend his book, all his desire to work the triumph of his belief, remained intact. Yet his mental perturbation was becoming great, he had to seek for ideas, wondering how he should enter the Pope's presence, what he should say, what precise terms he should employ. Something heavy and mysterious which he could hardly account for seemed to weigh him down. At bottom he was weary, already exhausted, only held up by his dream, his compassion for human misery. However, he would enter in all haste, he would fall upon his knees and speak as he best could, letting his heart flow forth. And assuredly the Holy Father would smile on him, and dismiss him with a promise that he would not sign the condemnation of a work in which he had found the expression of his own most cherished thoughts.

Then, again, such an acute sensation as of fainting came over Pierre that he went up to the window to press his burning brow against the cold glass. His ears were buzzing, his legs staggering, whilst his brain throbbed violently. And he was striving to forget his thoughts by gazing upon the black immensity of Rome, longing to be steeped in night himself, total, healing night, the night in which one sleeps on for ever, knowing neither pain nor wretchedness, when all at once he became conscious that somebody was standing behind him; and thereupon, with a start, he turned round.

And there, indeed, stood Signor Squadra in his black livery. Again he made one of his customary bows to invite the visitor to follow him, and again he walked on in front, crossing the little throne-room, and slowly opening the farther door. Then he drew aside, allowed Pierre to enter, and noiselessly closed the door behind him.

Pierre was in his Holiness's bed-room. He had feared one of those overwhelming attacks of emotion which madden or paralyse one. He had been told of women reaching the Pope's presence in a fainting condition, staggering as if intoxicated, while others came with a rush, as though upheld and borne along by invisible pinions. And suddenly the anguish of his own spell of waiting, his intense feverishness, ceased in a sort of astonishment, a reaction which rendered him very calm and so restored his clearness of vision, that he could see everything. As he entered he distinctly realised the decisive importance of such

an audience, he, a mere petty priest in presence of the Supreme Pontiff, the Head of the Church. All his religious and moral life would depend on it; and possibly it was this sudden thought that thus chilled him on the threshold of the redoubtable sanctuary, which he had approached with such quivering steps, and which he would not have thought to enter otherwise than with distracted heart and loss of senses, unable to do more than stammer the simple prayers of childhood.

Later on, when he sought to classify his recollections he remembered that his eyes had first lighted on Leo XIII, not, however, to the exclusion of his surroundings, but in conjunction with them, that spacious room hung with yellow damask whose alcove, adorned with fluted marble columns, was so deep that the bed was quite hidden away in it, as well as other articles of furniture, a couch, a wardrobe, and some trunks, those famous trunks in which the treasure of the Peter's Pence was said to be securely locked. A sort of Louis XIV writing-desk with ornaments of engraved brass stood face to face with a large gilded and painted Louis XV pier table on which a lamp was burning beside a lofty crucifix. The room was virtually bare, only three arm-chairs and four or five other chairs, upholstered in light silk, being disposed here and there over the well-worn carpet. And on one of the arm-chairs sat Leo XIII, near a small table on which another lamp with a shade had been placed. Three newspapers, moreover, lay there, two of them French and one Italian, and the last was half unfolded as if the Pope had momentarily turned

from it to stir a glass of syrup, standing beside him, with a long silver-gilt spoon.

In the same way as Pierre saw the Pope's room, he saw his costume, his cassock of white cloth with white buttons, his white skull-cap, his white cape and his white sash fringed with gold and broided at either end with golden keys. His stockings were white, his slippers were of red velvet, and these again were broidered with golden keys. What surprised the young priest, however, was his Holiness's face and figure, which now seemed so shrunken that he scarcely recognised them. This was his fourth meeting with the Pope. He had seen him walking in the Vatican gardens, enthroned in the Hall of Beatifications, and pontifying at St. Peter's, and now he beheld him on that arm-chair, in privacy, and looking so slight and fragile that he could not restrain a feeling of affectionate anxiety. Leo's neck was particularly remarkable, slender beyond belief, suggesting the neck of some little, aged, white bird. And his face, of the pallor of alabaster, was characteristically transparent, to such a degree, indeed, that one could see the lamplight through his large commanding nose, as if the blood had entirely withdrawn from that organ. A mouth of great length, with white bloodless lips, streaked the lower part of the papal countenance, and the eyes alone had remained young and handsome. Superb eyes they were, brilliant like black diamonds, endowed with sufficient penetration and strength to lay souls open and force them to confess the truth aloud. Some scanty white curls emerged from

under the white skull-cap, thus whitely crowning the thin white face, whose ugliness was softened by all this whiteness, this spiritual whiteness in which Leo XIII's flesh seemed as it were but pure lily-white florescence.

At the first glance, however, Pierre noticed that if Signor Squadra had kept him waiting, it had not been in order to compel the Holy Father to don a clean cassock, for the one he was wearing was badly soiled by snuff. A number of brown stains had trickled down the front of the garment beside the buttons, and just like any good /bourgeois/, his Holiness had a handkerchief on his knees to wipe himself. Apart from all this he seemed in good health, having recovered from his recent indisposition as easily as he usually recovered from such passing illnesses, sober, prudent old man that he was, quite free from organic disease, and simply declining by reason of progressive natural exhaustion.

Immediately on entering Pierre had felt that the Pope's sparkling eyes, those two black diamonds, were fixed upon him. The silence was profound, and the lamps burned with motionless, pallid flames. He had to approach, and after making the three genuflections prescribed by etiquette, he stooped over one of the Pope's feet resting on a cushion in order to kiss the red velvet slipper. And on the Pope's side there was not a word, not a gesture, not a movement. When the young man drew himself up again he found the two black diamonds, those two eyes which were all brightness and intelligence, still riveted on him.

But at last Leo XIII, who had been unwilling to spare the

young priest the humble duty of kissing his foot and who now left him standing, began to speak, whilst still examining him, probing, as it were, his very soul. "My son," he said, "you greatly desired to see me, and I consented to afford you that satisfaction."

He spoke in French, somewhat uncertain French, pronounced after the Italian fashion, and so slowly did he articulate each sentence that one could have written it down like so much dictation. And his voice, as Pierre had previously noticed, was strong and nasal, one of those full voices which people are surprised to hear coming from debile and apparently bloodless and breathless frames.

In response to the Holy Father's remark Pierre contented himself with bowing, knowing that respect required him to wait for a direct answer before speaking. However, this question promptly came. "You live in Paris?" asked Leo XIII.

"Yes, Holy Father."

"Are you attached to one of the great parishes of the city?"

"No, Holy Father. I simply officiate at the little church of Neuilly."

"Ah, yes, Neuilly, that is in the direction of the Bois de Boulogne, is it not? And how old are you, my son?"

"Thirty-four, Holy Father."

A short interval followed. Leo XIII had at last lowered his eyes. With frail, ivory hand he took up the glass beside him, again stirred the syrup with the long spoon, and then drank a little of it. And all this he did gently and slowly, with a prudent, judicious

air, as was his wont no doubt in everything. "I have read your book, my son," he resumed. "Yes, the greater part of it. As a rule only fragments are submitted to me. But a person who is interested in you handed me the volume, begging me to glance through it. And that is how I was able to look into it."

As he spoke he made a slight gesture in which Pierre fancied he could detect a protest against the isolation in which he was kept by those surrounding him, who, as Monsignor Nani had said, maintained a strict watch in order that nothing they objected to might reach him. And thereupon the young priest ventured to say: "I thank your Holiness for having done me so much honour. No greater or more desired happiness could have befallen me." He was indeed so happy! On seeing the Pope so calm, so free from all signs of anger, and on hearing him speak in that way of his book, like one well acquainted with it, he imagined that his cause was won.

"You are in relations with Monsieur le Vicomte Philibert de la Choue, are you not, my son?" continued Leo XIII. "I was struck by the resemblance between some of your ideas and those of that devoted servant of the Church, who has in other ways given us previous testimony of his good feelings."

"Yes, indeed, Holy Father, Monsieur de la Choue is kind enough to show me some affection. We have often talked together, so it is not surprising that I should have given expression to some of his most cherished ideas."

"No doubt, no doubt. For instance, there is that question of

the working-class guilds with which he largely occupies himself – with which, in fact, he occupies himself rather too much. At the time of his last journey to Rome he spoke to me of it in the most pressing manner. And in the same way, quite recently, another of your compatriots, one of the best and worthiest of men, Monsieur le Baron de Fouras, who brought us that superb pilgrimage of the St. Peter's Pence Fund, never ceased his efforts until I consented to receive him, when he spoke to me on the same subject during nearly an hour. Only it must be said that they do not agree in the matter, for one begs me to do things which the other will not have me do on any account."

Pierre realised that the conversation was straying away from his book, but he remembered having promised the Viscount that if he should see the Pope he would make an attempt to obtain from him a decisive expression of opinion on the famous question as to whether the working-class guilds or corporations should be free or obligatory, open or closed. And the unhappy Viscount, kept in Paris by the gout, had written the young priest letter after letter on the subject, whilst his rival the Baron, availing himself of the opportunity offered by the international pilgrimage, endeavoured to wring from the Pope an approval of his own views, with which he would have returned in triumph to France. Pierre conscientiously desired to keep his promise, and so he answered: "Your Holiness knows better than any of us in which direction true wisdom lies. Monsieur de Fouras is of opinion that salvation, the solution of the labour question, lies

simply in the re-establishment of the old free corporations, whilst Monsieur de la Choue desires the corporations to be obligatory, protected by the state and governed by new regulations. This last conception is certainly more in agreement with the social ideas now prevalent in France. Should your Holiness condescend to express a favourable opinion in that sense, the young French Catholic party would certainly know how to turn it to good result, by producing quite a movement of the working classes in favour of the Church."

In his quiet way Leo XIII responded: "But I cannot. Frenchmen always ask things of me which I cannot, will not do. What I will allow you to say on my behalf to Monsieur de la Choue is, that though I cannot content him I have not contented Monsieur de Fouras. He obtained from me nothing beyond the expression of my sincere good-will for the French working classes, who are so dear to me and who can do so much for the restoration of the faith. You must surely understand, however, that among you Frenchmen there are questions of detail, of mere organisation, so to say, into which I cannot possibly enter without imparting to them an importance which they do not have, and at the same time greatly discontenting some people should I please others."

As the Pope pronounced these last words he smiled a pale smile, in which the shrewd, conciliatory politician, who was determined not to allow his infallibility to be compromised in useless and risky ventures, was fully revealed. And then he drank

a little more syrup and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, like a sovereign whose Court day is over and who takes his ease, having chosen this hour of solitude and silence to chat as long as he may be so inclined.

Pierre, however, sought to bring him back to the subject of his book. "Monsieur de la Choue," said he, "has shown me so much kindness and is so anxious to know the fate reserved to my book – as if, indeed, it were his own – that I should have been very happy to convey to him an expression of your Holiness's approval."

However, the Pope continued wiping his mouth and did not reply.

"I became acquainted with the Viscount," continued Pierre, "at the residence of his Eminence Cardinal Bergerot, another great heart whose ardent charity ought to suffice to restore the faith in France."

This time the effect was immediate. "Ah! yes, Monsieur le Cardinal Bergerot!" said Leo XIII. "I read that letter of his which is printed at the beginning of your book. He was very badly inspired in writing it to you; and you, my son, acted very culpably on the day you published it. I cannot yet believe that Monsieur le Cardinal Bergerot had read some of your pages when he sent you an expression of his complete and full approval. I prefer to charge him with ignorance and thoughtlessness. How could he approve of your attacks on dogma, your revolutionary theories which tend to the complete destruction of our holy religion?"

If it be a fact that he had read your book, the only excuse he can invoke is sudden and inexplicable aberration. It is true that a very bad spirit prevails among a small portion of the French clergy. What are called Gallican ideas are ever sprouting up like noxious weeds; there is a malcontent Liberalism rebellious to our authority which continually hungers for free examination and sentimental adventures."

The Pope grew animated as he spoke. Italian words mingled with his hesitating French, and every now and again his full nasal voice resounded with the sonority of a brass instrument. "Monsieur le Cardinal Bergerot," he continued, "must be given to understand that we shall crush him on the day when we see in him nothing but a rebellious son. He owes the example of obedience; we shall acquaint him with our displeasure, and we hope that he will submit. Humility and charity are great virtues doubtless, and we have always taken pleasure in recognising them in him. But they must not be the refuge of a rebellious heart, for they are as nothing unless accompanied by obedience – obedience, obedience, the finest adornment of the great saints!"

Pierre listened thunderstruck, overcome. He forgot himself to think of the apostle of kindness and tolerance upon whose head he had drawn this all-powerful anger. So Don Vigilio had spoken the truth: over and above his – Pierre's – head the denunciations of the Bishops of Evreux and Poitiers were about to fall on the man who opposed their Ultramontane policy, that worthy and gentle Cardinal Bergerot, whose heart was open to all the woes of

the lowly and the poor. This filled the young priest with despair; he could accept the denunciation of the Bishop of Tarbes acting on behalf of the Fathers of the Grotto, for that only fell on himself, as a reprisal for what he had written about Lourdes; but the underhand warfare of the others exasperated him, filled him with dolorous indignation. And from that puny old man before him with the slender, scraggy neck of an aged bird, he had suddenly seen such a wrathful, formidable Master arise that he trembled. How could he have allowed himself to be deceived by appearances on entering? How could he have imagined that he was simply in presence of a poor old man, worn out by age, desirous of peace, and ready for every concession? A blast had swept through that sleepy chamber, and all his doubts and his anguish awoke once more. Ah! that Pope, how thoroughly he answered to all the accounts that he, Pierre, had heard but had refused to believe; so many people had told him in Rome that he would find Leo XIII a man of intellect rather than of sentiment, a man of the most unbounded pride, who from his very youth had nourished the supreme ambition, to such a point indeed that he had promised eventual triumph to his relatives in order that they might make the necessary sacrifices for him, while since he had occupied the pontifical throne his one will and determination had been to reign, to reign in spite of all, to be the sole absolute and omnipotent master of the world! And now here was reality arising with irresistible force and confirming everything. And yet Pierre struggled, stubbornly clutching at his dream once more.

"Oh! Holy Father," said he, "I should be grieved indeed if his Eminence should have a moment's worry on account of my unfortunate book. If I be guilty I can answer for my error, but his Eminence only obeyed the dictates of his heart and can only have transgressed by excess of love for the disinherited of the world!"

Leo XIII made no reply. He had again raised his superb eyes, those eyes of ardent life, set, as it were, in the motionless countenance of an alabaster idol; and once more he was fixedly gazing at the young priest.

And Pierre, amidst his returning feverishness, seemed to behold him growing in power and splendour, whilst behind him arose a vision of the ages, a vision of that long line of popes whom the young priest had previously evoked, the saintly and the proud ones, the warriors and the ascetics, the theologians and the diplomatists, those who had worn armour, those who had conquered by the Cross, those who had disposed of empires as of mere provinces which God had committed to their charge. And in particular Pierre beheld the great Gregory, the conqueror and founder, and Sixtus V, the negotiator and politician, who had first foreseen the eventual victory of the papacy over all the vanquished monarchies. Ah! what a throng of magnificent princes, of sovereign masters with powerful brains and arms, there was behind that pale, motionless, old man! What an accumulation of inexhaustible determination, stubborn genius, and boundless domination! The whole history of human ambition, the whole effort of the ages to subject the nations to

the pride of one man, the greatest force that has ever conquered, exploited, and fashioned mankind in the name of its happiness! And even now, when territorial sovereignty had come to an end, how great was the spiritual sovereignty of that pale and slender old man, in whose presence women fainted, as if overcome by the divine splendour radiating from his person. Not only did all the resounding glories, the masterful triumphs of history spread out behind him, but heaven opened, the very spheres beyond life shone out in their dazzling mystery. He – the Pope – stood at the portals of heaven, holding the keys and opening those portals to human souls; all the ancient symbolism was revived, freed at last from the stains of royalty here below.

"Oh! I beg you, Holy Father," resumed Pierre, "if an example be needed strike none other than myself. I have come, and am here; decide my fate, but do not aggravate my punishment by filling me with remorse at having brought condemnation on the innocent."

Leo XIII still refrained from replying, though he continued to look at the young priest with burning eyes. And he, Pierre, no longer beheld Leo XIII, the last of a long line of popes, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, the Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, the Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Patriarch of the East, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the Temporal Domains of the Holy Church; he saw the Leo XIII that he had dreamt of, the awaited saviour who would dispel the frightful cataclysm in

which rotten society was sinking. He beheld him with his supple, lofty intelligence and fraternal, conciliatory tactics, avoiding friction and labouring to bring about unity whilst with his heart overflowing with love he went straight to the hearts of the multitude, again giving the best of his blood in sign of the new alliance. He raised him aloft as the sole remaining moral authority, the sole possible bond of charity and peace – as the Father, in fact, who alone could stamp out injustice among his children, destroy misery, and re-establish the liberating Law of Work by bringing the nations back to the faith of the primitive Church, the gentleness and the wisdom of the true Christian community. And in the deep silence of that room the great figure which he thus set up assumed invincible all-powerfulness, extraordinary majesty.

"Oh, I beseech you, Holy Father, listen to me," he said. "Do not even strike me, strike no one, neither a being nor a thing, anything that can suffer under the sun. Show kindness and indulgence to all, show all the kindness and indulgence which the sight of the world's sufferings must have set in you!"

And then, seeing that Leo XIII still remained silent and still left him standing there, he sank down upon his knees, as if felled by the growing emotion which rendered his heart so heavy. And within him there was a sort of /debacle/; all his doubts, all his anguish and sadness burst forth in an irresistible stream. There was the memory of the frightful day that he had just spent, the tragic death of Dario and Benedetta, which weighed on him like

lead; there were all the sufferings that he had experienced since his arrival in Rome, the destruction of his illusions, the wounds dealt to his delicacy, the buffets with which men and things had responded to his young enthusiasm; and, lying yet more deeply within his heart, there was the sum total of human wretchedness, the thought of famished ones howling for food, of mothers whose breasts were drained and who sobbed whilst kissing their hungry babes, of fathers without work, who clenched their fists and revolted – indeed, the whole of that hateful misery which is as old as mankind itself, which has preyed upon mankind since its earliest hour, and which he now had everywhere found increasing in horror and havoc, without a gleam of hope that it would ever be healed. And withal, yet more immense and more incurable, he felt within him a nameless sorrow to which he could assign no precise cause or name – an universal, an illimitable sorrow with which he melted despairingly, and which was perhaps the very sorrow of life.

"O Holy Father!" he exclaimed, "I myself have no existence and my book has no existence. I desired, passionately desired to see your Holiness that I might explain and defend myself. But I no longer know, I can no longer recall a single one of the things that I wished to say, I can only weep, weep the tears which are stifling me. Yes, I am but a poor man, and the only need I feel is to speak to you of the poor. Oh! the poor ones, oh! the lowly ones, whom for two years past I have seen in our faubourgs of Paris, so wretched and so full of pain; the poor little children that

I have picked out of the snow, the poor little angels who had eaten nothing for two days; the women too, consumed by consumption, without bread or fire, shivering in filthy hovels; and the men thrown on the street by slackness of trade, weary of begging for work as one begs for alms, sinking back into night, drunken with rage and harbouring the sole avenging thought of setting the whole city afire! And that night too, that terrible night, when in a room of horror I beheld a mother who had just killed herself with her five little ones, she lying on a palliasse suckling her last-born, and two little girls, two pretty little blondes, sleeping the last sleep beside her, while the two boys had succumbed farther away, one of them crouching against a wall, and the other lying upon the floor, distorted as though by a last effort to avoid death!.. O Holy Father! I am but an ambassador, the messenger of those who suffer and who sob, the humble delegate of the humble ones who die of want beneath the hateful harshness, the frightful injustice of our present-day social system! And I bring your Holiness their tears, and I lay their tortures at your Holiness's feet, I raise their cry of woe, like a cry from the abyss, that cry which demands justice unless indeed the very heavens are to fall! Oh! show your loving kindness, Holy Father, show compassion!"

The young man had stretched out his arms and implored Leo XIII with a gesture as of supreme appeal to the divine compassion. Then he continued: "And here, Holy Father, in this splendid and eternal Rome, is not the want and misery as frightful! During the weeks that I have roamed hither and thither

among the dust of famous ruins, I have never ceased to come in contact with evils which demand cure. Ah! to think of all that is crumbling, all that is expiring, the agony of so much glory, the fearful sadness of a world which is dying of exhaustion and hunger! Yonder, under your Holiness's windows, have I not seen a district of horrors, a district of unfinished palaces stricken like rickety children who cannot attain to full growth, palaces which are already in ruins and have become places of refuge for all the woeful misery of Rome? And here, as in Paris, what a suffering multitude, what a shameless exhibition too of the social sore, the devouring cancer openly tolerated and displayed in utter heedlessness! There are whole families leading idle and hungry lives in the splendid sunlight; fathers waiting for work to fall to them from heaven; sons listlessly spending their days asleep on the dry grass; mothers and daughters, withered before their time, shuffling about in loquacious idleness. O Holy Father, already tomorrow at dawn may your Holiness open that window yonder and with your benediction awaken that great childish people, which still slumbers in ignorance and poverty! May your Holiness give it the soul it lacks, a soul with the consciousness of human dignity, of the necessary law of work, of free and fraternal life regulated by justice only! Yes, may your Holiness make a people out of that heap of wretches, whose excuse lies in all their bodily suffering and mental night, who live like the beasts that go by and die, never knowing nor understanding, yet ever lashed onward with the whip!"

Pierre's sobs were gradually choking him, and it was only the impulse of his passion which still enabled him to speak. "And, Holy Father," he continued, "is it not to you that I ought to address myself in the name of all these wretched ones? Are you not the Father, and is it not before the Father that the messenger of the poor and the lowly should kneel as I am kneeling now? And is it not to the Father that he should bring the huge burden of their sorrows and ask for pity and help and justice? Yes, particularly for justice! And since you are the Father throw the doors wide open so that all may enter, even the humblest of your children, the faithful, the chance passers, even the rebellious ones and those who have gone astray but who will perhaps enter and whom you will save from the errors of abandonment! Be as the house of refuge on the dangerous road, the loving greeter of the wayfarer, the lamp of hospitality which ever burns, and is seen afar off and saves one in the storm! And since, O Father, you are power be salvation also! You can do all; you have centuries of domination behind you; you have nowadays risen to a moral authority which has rendered you the arbiter of the world; you are there before me like the very majesty of the sun which illumines and fructifies! Oh! be the star of kindness and charity, be the redeemer; take in hand once more the purpose of Jesus, which has been perverted by being left in the hands of the rich and the powerful who have ended by transforming the work of the Gospel into the most hateful of all monuments of pride and tyranny! And since the work has been spoilt, take it in hand, begin it afresh, place

yourself on the side of the little ones, the lowly ones, the poor ones, and bring them back to the peace, the fraternity, and the justice of the original Christian communion. And say, O Father, that I have understood you, that I have sincerely expressed in this respect your most cherished ideas, the sole living desire of your reign! The rest, oh! the rest, my book, myself, what matter they! I do not defend myself, I only seek your glory and the happiness of mankind. Say that from the depths of this Vatican you have heard the rending of our corrupt modern societies! Say that you have quivered with loving pity, say that you desire to prevent the awful impending catastrophe by recalling the Gospel to the hearts of your children who are stricken with madness, and by bringing them back to the age of simplicity and purity when the first Christians lived together in innocent brotherhood! Yes, it is for that reason, is it not, that you have placed yourself, Father, on the side of the poor, and for that reason I am here and entreat you for pity and kindness and justice with my whole soul!"

Then the young man gave way beneath his emotion, and fell all of a heap upon the floor amidst a rush of sobs – loud, endless sobs, which flowed forth in billows, coming as it were not only from himself but from all the wretched, from the whole world in whose veins sorrow coursed mingled with the very blood of life. He was there as the ambassador of suffering, as he had said. And indeed, at the foot of that mute and motionless pope, he was like the personification of the whole of human woe.

Leo XIII, who was extremely fond of talking and could only

listen to others with an effort, had twice raised one of his pallid hands to interrupt the young priest. Then, gradually overcome by astonishment, touched by emotion himself, he had allowed him to continue, to go on to the end of his outburst. A little blood even had suffused the snowy whiteness of the Pontiff's face whilst his eyes shone out yet more brilliantly. And as soon as he saw the young man speechless at his feet, shaken by those sobs which seemed to be wrenching away his heart, he became anxious and leant forward: "Calm yourself, my son, raise yourself," he said.

But the sobs still continued, still flowed forth, all reason and respect being swept away amidst that distracted plaint of a wounded soul, that moan of suffering, dying flesh.

"Raise yourself, my son, it is not proper," repeated Leo XIII. "There, take that chair." And with a gesture of authority he at last invited the young man to sit down.

Pierre rose with pain, and at once seated himself in order that he might not fall. He brushed his hair back from his forehead, and wiped his scalding tears away with his hands, unable to understand what had just happened, but striving to regain his self-possession.

"You appeal to the Holy Father," said Leo XIII. "Ah! rest assured that his heart is full of pity and affection for those who are unfortunate. But that is not the point, it is our holy religion which is in question. I have read your book, a bad book, I tell you so at once, the most dangerous and culpable of books, precisely on account of its qualities, the pages in which I myself

felt interested. Yes, I was often fascinated, I should not have continued my perusal had I not felt carried away, transported by the ardent breath of your faith and enthusiasm. The subject 'New Rome' is such a beautiful one and impassions me so much! and certainly there is a book to be written under that title, but in a very different spirit to yours. You think that you have understood me, my son, that you have so penetrated yourself with my writings and actions that you simply express my most cherished ideas. But no, no, you have not understood me, and that is why I desired to see you, explain things to you, and convince you."

It was now Pierre who sat listening, mute and motionless. Yet he had only come thither to defend himself; for three months past he had been feverishly desiring this interview, preparing his arguments and feeling confident of victory; and now although he heard his book spoken of as dangerous and culpable he did not protest, did not reply with any one of those good reasons which he had deemed so irresistible. But the fact was that intense weariness had come upon him, the appeal that he had made, the tears that he had shed had left him utterly exhausted. By and by, however, he would be brave and would say what he had resolved to say.

"People do not understand me, do not understand me!" resumed Leo XIII with an air of impatient irritation. "It is incredible what trouble I have to make myself understood, in France especially! Take the temporal power for instance; how can you have fancied that the Holy See would ever enter into

any compromise on that question? Such language is unworthy of a priest, it is the chimerical dream of one who is ignorant of the conditions in which the papacy has hitherto lived and in which it must still live if it does not desire to disappear. Cannot you see the sophistry of your argument that the Church becomes the loftier the more it frees itself from the cares of terrestrial sovereignty? A purely spiritual royalty, a sway of charity and love, indeed, 'tis a fine imaginative idea! But who will ensure us respect? Who will grant us the alms of a stone on which to rest our head if we are ever driven forth and forced to roam the highways? Who will guarantee our independence when we are at the mercy of every state?.. No, no! this soil of Rome is ours, we have inherited it from the long line of our ancestors, and it is the indestructible, eternal soil on which the Church is built, so that any relinquishment would mean the downfall of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church. And, moreover, we could not relinquish it; we are bound by our oath to God and man."

He paused for a moment to allow Pierre to answer him. But the latter to his stupefaction could say nothing, for he perceived that this pope spoke as he was bound to speak. All the heavy mysterious things which had weighed the young priest down whilst he was waiting in the ante-room, now became more and more clearly defined. They were, indeed, the things which he had seen and learnt since his arrival in Rome, the disillusion, the rebuffs which he had experienced, all the many points of

difference between existing reality and imagination, whereby his dream of a return to primitive Christianity was already half shattered. And in particular he remembered the hour which he had spent on the dome of St. Peter's, when, in presence of the old city of glory so stubbornly clinging to its purple, he had realised that he was an imbecile with his idea of a purely spiritual pope. He had that day fled from the furious shouts of the pilgrims acclaiming the Pope-King. He had only accepted the necessity for money, that last form of servitude still binding the Pope to earth. But all had crumbled afterwards, when he had beheld the real Rome, the ancient city of pride and domination where the papacy can never be complete without the temporal power. Too many bonds, dogma, tradition, environment, the very soil itself rendered the Church for ever immutable. It was only in appearances that she could make concessions, and a time would even arrive when her concessions would cease, in presence of the impossibility of going any further without committing suicide. If his, Pierre's, dream of a New Rome were ever to be realised, it would only be faraway from ancient Rome. Only in some distant region could the new Christianity arise, for Catholicism was bound to die on the spot when the last of the popes, riveted to that land of ruins, should disappear beneath the falling dome of St. Peter's, which would fall as surely as the temple of Jupiter had fallen! And, as for that pope of the present day, though he might have no kingdom, though age might have made him weak and fragile, though his bloodless pallor might be that of some

ancient idol of wax, he none the less flared with the red passion for universal sovereignty, he was none the less the stubborn scion of his ancestry, the Pontifex Maximus, the Caesar Imperator in whose veins flowed the blood of Augustus, master of the world.

"You must be fully aware," resumed Leo XIII, "of the ardent desire for unity which has always possessed us. We were very happy on the day when we unified the rite, by imposing the Roman rite throughout the whole Catholic world. This is one of our most cherished victories, for it can do much to uphold our authority. And I hope that our efforts in the East will end by bringing our dear brethren of the dissident communions back to us, in the same way as I do not despair of convincing the Anglican sects, without speaking of the other so-called Protestant sects who will be compelled to return to the bosom of the only Church, the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church, when the times predicted by the Christ shall be accomplished. But a thing which you did not say in your book is that the Church can relinquish nothing whatever of dogma. On the contrary, you seem to fancy that an agreement might be effected, concessions made on either side, and that, my son, is a culpable thought, such language as a priest cannot use without being guilty of a crime. No, the truth is absolute, not a stone of the edifice shall be changed. Oh! in matters of form, we will do whatever may be asked. We are ready to adopt the most conciliatory courses if it be only a question of turning certain difficulties and weighing expressions in order to facilitate agreement... Again, there is the part we have

taken in contemporary socialism, and here too it is necessary that we should be understood. Those whom you have so well called the disinherited of the world, are certainly the object of our solicitude. If socialism be simply a desire for justice, and a constant determination to come to the help of the weak and the suffering, who can claim to give more thought to the matter and work with more energy than ourselves? Has not the Church always been the mother of the afflicted, the helper and benefactress of the poor? We are for all reasonable progress, we admit all new social forms which will promote peace and fraternity... Only we can but condemn that socialism which begins by driving away God as a means of ensuring the happiness of mankind. Therein lies simple savagery, an abominable relapse into the primitive state in which there can only be catastrophe, conflagration, and massacre. And that again is a point on which you have not laid sufficient stress, for you have not shown in your book that there can be no progress outside the pale of the Church, that she is really the only initiatory and guiding power to whom one may surrender oneself without fear. Indeed, and in this again you have sinned, it seemed to me as if you set God on one side, as if for you religion lay solely in a certain bent of the soul, a florescence of love and charity, which sufficed one to work one's salvation. But that is execrable heresy. God is ever present, master of souls and bodies; and religion remains the bond, the law, the very governing power of mankind, apart from which there can only be barbarism in this world and damnation

in the next. And, once again, forms are of no importance; it is sufficient that dogma should remain. Thus our adhesion to the French Republic proves that we in no wise mean to link the fate of religion to that of any form of government, however august and ancient the latter may be. Dynasties may have done their time, but God is eternal. Kings may perish, but God lives! And, moreover, there is nothing anti-Christian in the republican form of government; indeed, on the contrary, it would seem like an awakening of that Christian commonwealth to which you have referred in some really charming pages. The worst is that liberty at once becomes license, and that our desire for conciliation is often very badly requited... But ah! what a wicked book you have written, my son, – with the best intentions, I am willing to believe, – and how your silence shows that you are beginning to recognise the disastrous consequences of your error."

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