

# МАРГАРЕТ ОЛИФАНТ

A

BELEAGUERED

CITY

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**A Beleaguered City**

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*A Beleaguered City / Being a Narrative of Certain Recent Events in the City of Semur, in the Department of the Haute Bourgogne. A Story of the Seen and the Unseen:*

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**Mrs. Oliphant**  
**A Beleaguered City / Being a**  
**Narrative of Certain Recent**  
**Events in the City of Semur,**  
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**Haute Bourgogne. A Story**  
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**THE NARRATIVE OF**  
**M. LE MAIRE: THE**  
**CONDITION OF THE CITY**

I, Martin Dupin (de la Clairière), had the honour of holding the office of Maire in the town of Semur, in the Haute Bourgogne, at the time when the following events occurred. It will be perceived, therefore, that no one could have more complete knowledge of the facts—at once from my official position, and from the place of eminence in the affairs of the

district generally which my family has held for many generations —by what citizen-like virtues and unblemished integrity I will not be vain enough to specify. Nor is it necessary; for no one who knows Semur can be ignorant of the position held by the Dupins, from father to son. The estate La Clairière has been so long in the family that we might very well, were we disposed, add its name to our own, as so many families in France do; and, indeed, I do not prevent my wife (whose prejudices I respect) from making this use of it upon her cards. But, for myself, *bourgeois* I was born and *bourgeois* I mean to die. My residence, like that of my father and grandfather, is at No. 29 in the Grande Rue, opposite the Cathedral, and not far from the Hospital of St. Jean. We inhabit the first floor, along with the *rez-de-chaussée*, which has been turned into domestic offices suitable for the needs of the family. My mother, holding a respected place in my household, lives with us in the most perfect family union. My wife (*née de Champfleurie*) is everything that is calculated to render a household happy; but, alas one only of our two children survives to bless us. I have thought these details of my private circumstances necessary, to explain the following narrative; to which I will also add, by way of introduction, a simple sketch of the town itself and its general conditions before these remarkable events occurred.

It was on a summer evening about sunset, the middle of the month of June, that my attention was attracted by an incident of no importance which occurred in the street, when I was making

my way home, after an inspection of the young vines in my new vineyard to the left of La Clairière. All were in perfectly good condition, and none of the many signs which point to the arrival of the insect were apparent. I had come back in good spirits, thinking of the prosperity which I was happy to believe I had merited by a conscientious performance of all my duties. I had little with which to blame myself: not only my wife and relations, but my dependants and neighbours, approved my conduct as a man; and even my fellow-citizens, exacting as they are, had confirmed in my favour the good opinion which my family had been fortunate enough to secure from father to son. These thoughts were in my mind as I turned the corner of the Grande Rue and approached my own house. At this moment the tinkle of a little bell warned all the bystanders of the procession which was about to pass, carrying the rites of the Church to some dying person. Some of the women, always devout, fell on their knees. I did not go so far as this, for I do not pretend, in these days of progress, to have retained the same attitude of mind as that which it is no doubt becoming to behold in the more devout sex; but I stood respectfully out of the way, and took off my hat, as good breeding alone, if nothing else, demanded of me. Just in front of me, however, was Jacques Richard, always a troublesome individual, standing doggedly, with his hat upon his head and his hands in his pockets, straight in the path of M. le Curé. There is not in all France a more obstinate fellow. He stood there, notwithstanding the efforts of a good woman to draw him away,

and though I myself called to him. M. le Curé is not the man to flinch; and as he passed, walking as usual very quickly and straight, his soutane brushed against the blouse of Jacques. He gave one quick glance from beneath his eyebrows at the profane interruption, but he would not distract himself from his sacred errand at such a moment. It is a sacred errand when any one, be he priest or layman, carries the best he can give to the bedside of the dying. I said this to Jacques when M. le Curé had passed and the bell went tinkling on along the street. ‘Jacques,’ said I, ‘I do not call it impious, like this good woman, but I call it inhuman. What! a man goes to carry help to the dying, and you show him no respect!’

This brought the colour to his face; and I think, perhaps, that he might have become ashamed of the part he had played; but the women pushed in again, as they are so fond of doing. ‘Oh, M. le Maire, he does not deserve that you should lose your words upon him!’ they cried; ‘and, besides, is it likely he will pay any attention to you when he tries to stop even the *bon Dieu*?’

‘The *bon Dieu!*’ cried Jacques. ‘Why doesn't He clear the way for himself? Look here. I do not care one farthing for your *bon Dieu*. Here is mine; I carry him about with me.’ And he took a piece of a hundred sous out of his pocket (how had it got there?) ‘*Vive l'argent!*’ he said. ‘You know it yourself, though you will not say so. There is no *bon Dieu* but money. With money you can do anything. *L'argent c'est le bon Dieu.*’

‘Be silent,’ I cried, ‘thou profane one!’ And the women were

still more indignant than I. 'We shall see, we shall see; when he is ill and would give his soul for something to wet his lips, his *bon Dieu* will not do much for him,' cried one; and another said, clasping her hands with a shrill cry, 'It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves!'

'The dead rise out of their graves!' These words, though one has heard them before, took possession of my imagination. I saw the rude fellow go along the street as I went on, tossing the coin in his hand. One time it fell to the ground and rang upon the pavement, and he laughed more loudly as he picked it up. He was walking towards the sunset, and I too, at a distance after. The sky was full of rose-tinted clouds floating across the blue, floating high over the grey pinnacles of the Cathedral, and filling the long open line of the Rue St. Etienne down which he was going. As I crossed to my own house I caught him full against the light, in his blue blouse, tossing the big silver piece in the air, and heard him laugh and shout '*Vive l'argent!* This is the only *bon Dieu*.' Though there are many people who live as if this were their sentiment, there are few who give it such brutal expression; but some of the people at the corner of the street laughed too. 'Bravo, Jacques!' they cried; and one said, 'You are right, *mon ami*, the only god to trust in nowadays.' 'It is a short *credo*, M. le Maire,' said another, who caught my eye. He saw I was displeased, this one, and his countenance changed at once.

'Yes, Jean Pierre,' I said, 'it is worse than short—it is brutal. I hope no man who respects himself will ever countenance it. It is

against the dignity of human nature, if nothing more.'

'Ah, M. le Maire!' cried a poor woman, one of the good ladies of the market, with entrenchments of baskets all round her, who had been walking my way; 'ah, M. le Maire! did not I say true? it is enough to bring the dead out of their graves.'

'That would be something to see,' said Jean Pierre, with a laugh; 'and I hope, *ma bonne femme*, that if you have any interest with them, you will entreat these gentlemen to appear before I go away.'

'I do not like such jesting,' said I. 'The dead are very dead and will not disturb anybody, but even the prejudices of respectable persons ought to be respected. A ribald like Jacques counts for nothing, but I did not expect this from you.'

'What would you, M. le Maire?' he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'We are made like that. I respect prejudices as you say. My wife is a good woman, she prays for two—but me! How can I tell that Jacques is not right after all? A *grosse pièce* of a hundred sous, one sees that, one knows what it can do—but for the other!' He thrust up one shoulder to his ear, and turned up the palms of his hands.

'It is our duty at all times to respect the convictions of others,' I said, severely; and passed on to my own house, having no desire to encourage discussions at the street corner. A man in my position is obliged to be always mindful of the example he ought to set. But I had not yet done with this phrase, which had, as I have said, caught my ear and my imagination. My mother was in

the great *salle* of the *rez-de-chausée*, as I passed, in altercation with a peasant who had just brought us in some loads of wood. There is often, it seems to me, a sort of *refrain* in conversation, which one catches everywhere as one comes and goes. Figure my astonishment when I heard from the lips of my good mother the same words with which that good-for-nothing Jacques Richard had made the profession of his brutal faith. 'Go!' she cried, in anger; 'you are all the same. Money is your god. *De grosses pièces*, that is all you think of in these days.'

'*Eh, bien*, madame,' said the peasant; 'and if so, what then? Don't you others, gentlemen and ladies, do just the same? What is there in the world but money to think of? If it is a question of marriage, you demand what is the *dot*; if it is a question of office, you ask, Monsieur Untel, is he rich? And it is perfectly just. We know what money can do; but as for *le bon Dieu*, whom our grandmothers used to talk about—'

And lo! our *gros paysan* made exactly the same gesture as Jean Pierre. He put up his shoulders to his ears, and spread out the palms of his hands, as who should say, There is nothing further to be said.

Then there occurred a still more remarkable repetition. My mother, as may be supposed, being a very respectable person, and more or less *dévôte*, grew red with indignation and horror.

'Oh, these poor grandmothers!' she cried; 'God give them rest! It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves.'

'Oh, I will answer for *les morts*! they will give nobody any

trouble,' he said with a laugh. I went in and reproved the man severely, finding that, as I supposed, he had attempted to cheat my good mother in the price of the wood. Fortunately she had been quite as clever as he was. She went upstairs shaking her head, while I gave the man to understand that no one should speak to her but with the profoundest respect in my house. 'She has her opinions, like all respectable ladies,' I said, 'but under this roof these opinions shall always be sacred.' And, to do him justice, I will add that when it was put to him in this way Gros-Jean was ashamed of himself.

When I talked over these incidents with my wife, as we gave each other the narrative of our day's experiences, she was greatly distressed, as may be supposed. 'I try to hope they are not so bad as Bonne Maman thinks. But oh, *mon ami!*' she said, 'what will the world come to if this is what they really believe?'

'Take courage,' I said; 'the world will never come to anything much different from what it is. So long as there are *des anges* like thee to pray for us, the scale will not go down to the wrong side.'

I said this, of course, to please my Agnès, who is the best of wives; but on thinking it over after, I could not but be struck with the extreme justice (not to speak of the beauty of the sentiment) of this thought. The *bon Dieu*—if, indeed, that great Being is as represented to us by the Church—must naturally care as much for one-half of His creatures as for the other, though they have not the same weight in the world; and consequently the faith of the women must hold the balance straight, especially if, as is said,

they exceed us in point of numbers. This leaves a little margin for those of them who profess the same freedom of thought as is generally accorded to men—a class, I must add, which I abominate from the bottom of my heart.

I need not dwell upon other little scenes which impressed the same idea still more upon my mind. Semur, I need not say, is not the centre of the world, and might, therefore, be supposed likely to escape the full current of worldliness. We amuse ourselves little, and we have not any opportunity of rising to the heights of ambition; for our town is not even the *chef-lieu* of the department,—though this is a subject upon which I cannot trust myself to speak. Figure to yourself that La Rochette—a place of yesterday, without either the beauty or the antiquity of Semur—has been chosen as the centre of affairs, the residence of M. le Préfet! But I will not enter upon this question. What I was saying was, that, notwithstanding the fact that we amuse ourselves but little, that there is no theatre to speak of, little society, few distractions, and none of those inducements to strive for gain and to indulge the senses, which exist, for instance, in Paris—that capital of the world—yet, nevertheless, the thirst for money and for pleasure has increased among us to an extent which I cannot but consider alarming. Gros-Jean, our peasant, toils for money, and hoards; Jacques, who is a cooper and maker of wine casks, gains and drinks; Jean Pierre snatches at every sous that comes in his way, and spends it in yet worse dissipations. He is one who quails when he meets my eye; he sins *en cachette*; but Jacques is bold, and

defies opinion; and Gros-Jean is firm in the belief that to hoard money is the highest of mortal occupations. These three are types of what the population is at Semur. The men would all sell their souls for a *grosse pièce* of fifty sous—indeed, they would laugh, and express their delight that any one should believe them to love souls, if they could but have a chance of selling them; and the devil, who was once supposed to deal in that commodity, would be very welcome among us. And as for the *bon Dieu*—*pouff!* that was an affair of the grandmothers—*le bon Dieu c'est l'argent*. This is their creed. I was very near the beginning of my official year as Maire when my attention was called to these matters as I have described above. A man may go on for years keeping quiet himself—keeping out of tumult, religious or political—and make no discovery of the general current of feeling; but when you are forced to serve your country in any official capacity, and when your eyes are opened to the state of affairs around you, then I allow that an inexperienced observer might well cry out, as my wife did, ‘What will become of the world?’ I am not prejudiced myself—unnecessary to say that the foolish scruples of the women do not move me. But the devotion of the community at large to this pursuit of gain-money without any grandeur, and pleasure without any refinement—that is a thing which cannot fail to wound all who believe in human nature. To be a millionaire—that, I grant, would be pleasant. A man as rich as Monte Christo, able to do whatever he would, with the equipage of an English duke, the palace of an Italian prince, the

retinue of a Russian noble—he, indeed, might be excused if his money seemed to him a kind of god. But Gros-Jean, who lays up two sous at a time, and lives on black bread and an onion; and Jacques, whose *grosse pièce* but secures him the headache of a drunkard next morning—what to them could be this miserable deity? As for myself, however, it was my business, as Maire of the commune, to take as little notice as possible of the follies these people might say, and to hold the middle course between the prejudices of the respectable and the levities of the foolish. With this, without more, to think of, I had enough to keep all my faculties employed.

# **THE NARRATIVE OF M. LE MAIRE CONTINUED: BEGINNING OF THE LATE REMARKABLE EVENTS**

I do not attempt to make out any distinct connection between the simple incidents above recorded, and the extraordinary events that followed. I have related them as they happened; chiefly by way of showing the state of feeling in the city, and the sentiment which pervaded the community—a sentiment, I fear, too common in my country. I need not say that to encourage superstition is far from my wish. I am a man of my century, and proud of being so; very little disposed to yield to the domination of the clerical party, though desirous of showing all just tolerance for conscientious faith, and every respect for the prejudices of the ladies of my family. I am, moreover, all the more inclined to be careful of giving in my adhesion to any prodigy, in consequence of a consciousness that the faculty of imagination has always been one of my characteristics. It usually is so, I am aware, in superior minds, and it has procured me many pleasures unknown to the common herd. Had it been possible for me to believe that I had been misled by this faculty, I should have carefully refrained from putting upon record any account of my individual impressions;

but my attitude here is not that of a man recording his personal experiences only, but of one who is the official mouthpiece and representative of the commune, and whose duty it is to render to government and to the human race a true narrative of the very wonderful facts to which every citizen of Semur can bear witness. In this capacity it has become my duty so to arrange and edit the different accounts of the mystery, as to present one coherent and trustworthy chronicle to the world.

To proceed, however, with my narrative. It is not necessary for me to describe what summer is in the Haute Bourgogne. Our generous wines, our glorious fruits, are sufficient proof, without any assertion on my part. The summer with us is as a perpetual *fête*—at least, before the insect appeared it was so, though now anxiety about the condition of our vines may cloud our enjoyment of the glorious sunshine which ripens them hourly before our eyes. Judge, then, of the astonishment of the world when there suddenly came upon us a darkness as in the depth of winter, falling, without warning, into the midst of the brilliant weather to which we are accustomed, and which had never failed us before in the memory of man! It was the month of July, when, in ordinary seasons, a cloud is so rare that it is a joy to see one, merely as a variety upon the brightness. Suddenly, in the midst of our summer delights, this darkness came. Its first appearance took us so entirely by surprise that life seemed to stop short, and the business of the whole town was delayed by an hour or two; nobody being able to believe that at six o'clock in

the morning the sun had not risen. I do not assert that the sun did not rise; all I mean to say is that at Semur it was still dark, as in a morning of winter, and when it gradually and slowly became day many hours of the morning were already spent. And never shall I forget the aspect of day when it came. It was like a ghost or pale shadow of the glorious days of July with which we are usually blessed. The barometer did not go down, nor was there any rain, but an unusual greyness wrapped earth and sky. I heard people say in the streets, and I am aware that the same words came to my own lips: 'If it were not full summer, I should say it was going to snow.' We have much snow in the Haute Bourgogne, and we are well acquainted with this aspect of the skies. Of the depressing effect which this greyness exercised upon myself personally, greyness exercised upon myself personally, I will not speak. I have always been noted as a man of fine perceptions, and I was aware instinctively that such a state of the atmosphere must mean something more than was apparent on the surface. But, as the danger was of an entirely unprecedented character, it is not to be wondered at that I should be completely at a loss to divine what its meaning was. It was a blight some people said; and many were of opinion that it was caused by clouds of animalculæ coming, as is described in ancient writings, to destroy the crops, and even to affect the health of the population. The doctors scoffed at this; but they talked about malaria, which, as far as I could understand, was likely to produce exactly the same effect. The night closed in early as the day had dawned late; the lamps were

lighted before six o'clock, and daylight had only begun about ten! Figure to yourself, a July day! There ought to have been a moon almost at the full; but no moon was visible, no stars—nothing but a grey veil of clouds, growing darker and darker as the moments went on; such I have heard are the days and the nights in England, where the sea-fogs so often blot out the sky. But we are unacquainted with anything of the kind in our *plaisant pays de France*. There was nothing else talked of in Semur all that night, as may well be imagined. My own mind was extremely uneasy. Do what I would, I could not deliver myself from a sense of something dreadful in the air which was neither malaria nor animalculæ, I took a promenade through the streets that evening, accompanied by M. Barbou, my *adjoint*, to make sure that all was safe; and the darkness was such that we almost lost our way, though we were both born in the town and had known every turning from our boyhood. It cannot be denied that Semur is very badly lighted. We retain still the lanterns slung by cords across the streets which once were general in France, but which, in most places, have been superseded by the modern institution of gas. Gladly would I have distinguished my term of office by bringing gas to Semur. But the expense would have been great, and there were a hundred objections. In summer generally, the lanterns were of little consequence because of the brightness of the sky; but to see them now, twinkling dimly here and there, making us conscious how dark it was, was strange indeed. It was in the interests of order that we took our round, with a fear, in

my mind at least, of I knew not what. M. l'Adjoint said nothing, but no doubt he thought as I did.

While we were thus patrolling the city with a special eye to the prevention of all seditious assemblages, such as are too apt to take advantage of any circumstances that may disturb the ordinary life of a city, or throw discredit on its magistrates, we were accosted by Paul Lecamus, a man whom I have always considered as something of a visionary, though his conduct is irreproachable, and his life honourable and industrious. He entertains religious convictions of a curious kind; but, as the man is quite free from revolutionary sentiments, I have never considered it to be my duty to interfere with him, or to investigate his creed. Indeed, he has been treated generally in Semur as a dreamer of dreams—one who holds a great many impracticable and foolish opinions—though the respect which I always exact for those whose lives are respectable and worthy has been a protection to him. He was, I think, aware that he owed something to my good offices, and it was to me accordingly that he addressed himself.

‘Good evening, M. le Maire,’ he said; ‘you are groping about, like myself, in this strange night.’

‘Good evening M. Paul,’ I replied. ‘It is, indeed, a strange night. It indicates, I fear, that a storm is coming.’

M. Paul shook his head. There is a solemnity about even his ordinary appearance. He has a long face, pale, and adorned with a heavy, drooping moustache, which adds much to the solemn impression made by his countenance. He looked at me with great

gravity as he stood in the shadow of the lamp, and slowly shook his head.

‘You do not agree with me? Well! the opinion of a man like M. Paul Lecamus is always worthy to be heard.’

‘Oh!’ he said, ‘I am called visionary. I am not supposed to be a trustworthy witness. Nevertheless, if M. Le Maire will come with me, I will show him something that is very strange—something that is almost more wonderful than the darkness—more strange,’ he went on with great earnestness, ‘than any storm that ever ravaged Burgundy.’

‘That is much to say. A tempest now when the vines are in full bearing—’

‘Would be nothing, nothing to what I can show you. Only come with me to the Porte St. Lambert.’

‘If M. le Maire will excuse me,’ said M. Barbou, ‘I think I will go home. It is a little cold, and you are aware that I am always afraid of the damp.’ In fact, our coats were beaded with a cold dew as in November, and I could not but acknowledge that my respectable colleague had reason. Besides, we were close to his house, and he had, no doubt, the sustaining consciousness of having done everything that was really incumbent upon him. ‘Our ways lie together as far as my house,’ he said, with a slight chattering of his teeth. No doubt it was the cold. After we had walked with him to his door, we proceeded to the Porte St. Lambert. By this time almost everybody had re-entered their houses. The streets were very dark, and they were also very still.

When we reached the gates, at that hour of the night, we found them shut as a matter of course. The officers of the *octroi* were standing close together at the door of their office, in which the lamp was burning. The very lamp seemed oppressed by the heavy air; it burnt dully, surrounded with a yellow haze. The men had the appearance of suffering greatly from cold. They received me with a satisfaction which was very gratifying to me. 'At length here is M. le Maire himself,' they said.

'My good friends,' said I, 'you have a cold post to-night. The weather has changed in the most extraordinary way. I have no doubt the scientific gentlemen at the Musée will be able to tell us all about it—M. de Clairon—'

'Not to interrupt M. le Maire,' said Riou, of the *octroi*, 'I think there is more in it than any scientific gentleman can explain.'

'Ah! You think so. But they explain everything,' I said, with a smile. 'They tell us how the wind is going to blow.'

As I said this, there seemed to pass us, from the direction of the closed gates, a breath of air so cold that I could not restrain a shiver. They looked at each other. It was not a smile that passed between them—they were too pale, too cold, to smile but a look of intelligence. 'M. le Maire,' said one of them, 'perceives it too;' but they did not shiver as I did. They were like men turned into ice who could feel no more.

'It is, without doubt, the most extraordinary weather,' I said. My teeth chattered like Barbou's. It was all I could do to keep myself steady. No one made any reply; but Lecamus said, 'Have

the goodness to open the little postern for foot-passengers: M. le Maire wishes to make an inspection outside.'

Upon these words, Riou, who knew me well, caught me by the arm. 'A thousand pardons,' he said, 'M. le Maire; but I entreat you, do not go. Who can tell what is outside? Since this morning there is something very strange on the other side of the gates. If M. le Maire would listen to me, he would keep them shut night and day till *that* is gone, he would not go out into the midst of it. *Mon Dieu!* a man may be brave. I know the courage of M. le Maire; but to march without necessity into the jaws of hell: *mon Dieu!*' cried the poor man again. He crossed himself, and none of us smiled. Now a man may sign himself at the church door—one does so out of respect; but to use that ceremony for one's own advantage, before other men, is rare—except in the case of members of a very decided party. Riou was not one of these. He signed himself in sight of us all, and not one of us smiled.

The other was less familiar—he knew me only in my public capacity—he was one Gallais of the Quartier St. Médon. He said, taking off his hat: 'If I were M. le Maire, saving your respect, I would not go out into an unknown danger with this man here, a man who is known as a pietist, as a clerical, as one who sees visions—'

'He is not a clerical, he is a good citizen,' I said; 'come, lend us your lantern. Shall I shrink from my duty wherever it leads me? Nay, my good friends, the Maire of a French commune fears neither man nor devil in the exercise of his duty. M. Paul, lead

on.' When I said the word 'devil' a spasm of alarm passed over Riou's face. He crossed himself again. This time I could not but smile. 'My little Riou,' I said, 'do you know that you are a little imbecile with your piety? There is a time for everything.'

'Except religion, M. le Maire; that is never out of place,' said Gallais.

I could not believe my senses. 'Is it a conversion?' I said. 'Some of our Carmes déchaussés must have passed this way.'

'M. le Maire will soon see other teachers more wonderful than the Carmes déchaussés,' said Lecamus. He went and took down the lantern from its nail, and opened the little door. When it opened, I was once more penetrated by the same icy breath; once, twice, thrice, I cannot tell how many times this crossed me, as if some one passed. I looked round upon the others—I gave way a step. I could not help it. In spite of me, the hair seemed to rise erect on my head. The two officers stood close together, and Riou, collecting his courage, made an attempt to laugh. 'M. le Maire perceives,' he said, his lips trembling almost too much to form the words, 'that the winds are walking about.' 'Hush, for God's sake!' said the other, grasping him by the arm.

This recalled me to myself; and I followed Lecamus, who stood waiting for me holding the door a little ajar. He went on strangely, like—I can use no other words to express it—a man making his way in the face of a crowd, a thing very surprising to me. I followed him close; but the moment I emerged from the doorway something caught my breath. The same feeling seized

me also. I gasped; a sense of suffocation came upon me; I put out my hand to lay hold upon my guide. The solid grasp I got of his arm re-assured me a little, and he did not hesitate, but pushed his way on. We got out clear of the gate and the shadow of the wall, keeping close to the little watch-tower on the west side. Then he made a pause, and so did I. We stood against the tower and looked out before us. There was nothing there. The darkness was great, yet through the gloom of the night I could see the division of the road from the broken ground on either side; there was nothing there. I gasped, and drew myself up close against the wall, as Lecamus had also done. There was in the air, in the night, a sensation the most strange I have ever experienced. I have felt the same thing indeed at other times, in face of a great crowd, when thousands of people were moving, rustling, struggling, breathing around me, thronging all the vacant space, filling up every spot. This was the sensation that overwhelmed me here—a crowd: yet nothing to be seen but the darkness, the indistinct line of the road. We could not move for them, so close were they round us. What do I say? There was nobody—nothing—not a form to be seen, not a face but his and mine. I am obliged to confess that the moment was to me an awful moment. I could not speak. My heart beat wildly as if trying to escape from my breast—every breath I drew was with an effort. I clung to Lecamus with deadly and helpless terror, and forced myself back upon the wall, crouching against it; I did not turn and fly, as would have been natural. What say I? *did* not! I *could* not! they pressed round us so. Ah!

you would think I must be mad to use such words, for there was nobody near me—not a shadow even upon the road.

Lecamus would have gone farther on; he would have pressed his way boldly into the midst; but my courage was not equal to this. I clutched and clung to him, dragging myself along against the wall, my whole mind intent upon getting back. I was stronger than he, and he had no power to resist me. I turned back, stumbling blindly, keeping my face to that crowd (there was no one), but struggling back again, tearing the skin off my hands as I groped my way along the wall. Oh, the agony of seeing the door closed! I have buffeted my way through a crowd before now, but I may say that I never before knew what terror was. When I fell upon the door, dragging Lecamus with me, it opened, thank God! I stumbled in, clutching at Riou with my disengaged hand, and fell upon the floor of the *octroi*, where they thought I had fainted. But this was not the case. A man of resolution may give way to the overpowering sensations of the moment. His bodily faculties may fail him; but his mind will not fail. As in every really superior intelligence, my forces collected for the emergency. While the officers ran to bring me water, to search for the eau-de-vie which they had in a cupboard, I astonished them all by rising up, pale, but with full command of myself. ‘It is enough,’ I said, raising my hand. ‘I thank you, Messieurs, but nothing more is necessary;’ and I would not take any of their restoratives. They were impressed, as was only natural, by the sight of my perfect self-possession: it helped them to acquire for themselves

a demeanour befitting the occasion; and I felt, though still in great physical weakness and agitation, the consoling consciousness of having fulfilled my functions as head of the community.

‘M. le Maire has seen a—what there is outside?’ Riou cried, stammering in his excitement; and the other fixed upon me eyes which were hungering with eagerness—if, indeed, it is permitted to use such words.

‘I have seen—nothing, Riou,’ I said.

They looked at me with the utmost wonder. ‘M. le Maire has seen—nothing?’ said Riou. ‘Ah, I see! you say so to spare us. We have proved ourselves cowards; but if you will pardon me, M. le Maire, you, too, re-entered precipitately—you too! There are facts which may appal the bravest—but I implore you to tell us what you have seen.’

‘I have seen nothing,’ I said. As I spoke, my natural calm composure returned, my heart resumed its usual tranquil beating. ‘There is nothing to be seen—it is dark, and one can perceive the line of the road for but a little way—that is all. There is nothing to be seen—’

They looked at me, startled and incredulous. They did not know what to think. How could they refuse to believe me, sitting there calmly raising my eyes to them, making my statement with what they felt to be an air of perfect truth? But, then, how account for the precipitate return which they had already noted, the supposed faint, the pallor of my looks? They did not know what to think.

And here, let me remark, as in my conduct throughout these remarkable events, may be seen the benefit, the high advantage, of truth. Had not this been the truth, I could not have borne the searching of their looks. But it was true. There was nothing—nothing to be seen; in one sense, this was the thing of all others which overwhelmed my mind. But why insist upon these matters of detail to unenlightened men? There was nothing, and I had seen nothing. What I said was the truth.

All this time Lecamus had said nothing. As I raised myself from the ground, I had vaguely perceived him hanging up the lantern where it had been before; now he became distinct to me as I recovered the full possession of my faculties. He had seated himself upon a bench by the wall. There was no agitation about him; no sign of the thrill of departing excitement, which I felt going through my veins as through the strings of a harp. He was sitting against the wall, with his head drooping, his eyes cast down, an air of disappointment and despondency about him—nothing more. I got up as soon as I felt that I could go away with perfect propriety; but, before I left the place, called him. He got up when he heard his name, but he did it with reluctance. He came with me because I asked him to do so, not from any wish of his own. Very different were the feelings of Riou and Gallais. They did their utmost to engage me in conversation, to consult me about a hundred trifles, to ask me with the greatest deference what they ought to do in such and such cases, pressing close to me, trying every expedient to delay my departure. When we went

away they stood at the door of their little office close together, looking after us with looks which I found it difficult to forget; they would not abandon their post; but their faces were pale and contracted, their eyes wild with anxiety and distress.

It was only as I walked away, hearing my own steps and those of Lecamus ringing upon the pavement, that I began to realise what had happened. The effort of recovering my composure, the relief from the extreme excitement of terror (which, dreadful as the idea is, I am obliged to confess I had actually felt), the sudden influx of life and strength to my brain, had pushed away for the moment the recollection of what lay outside. When I thought of it again, the blood began once more to course in my veins. Lecamus went on by my side with his head down, the eyelids drooping over his eyes, not saying a word. He followed me when I called him: but cast a regretful look at the postern by which we had gone out, through which I had dragged him back in a panic (I confess it) unworthy of me. Only when we had left at some distance behind us that door into the unseen, did my senses come fully back to me, and I ventured to ask myself what it meant. ‘Lecamus,’ I said—I could scarcely put my question into words—‘what do you think? what is your idea?—how do you explain—’ Even then I am glad to think I had sufficient power of control not to betray all that I felt.

‘One does not try to explain,’ he said slowly; ‘one longs to know—that is all. If M. le Maire had not been—in such haste—had he been willing to go farther—to investigate—’

‘God forbid!’ I said; and the impulse to quicken my steps, to get home and put myself in safety, was almost more than I could restrain. But I forced myself to go quietly, to measure my steps by his, which were slow and reluctant, as if he dragged himself away with difficulty from that which was behind.

What was it? ‘Do not ask, do not ask!’ Nature seemed to say in my heart. Thoughts came into my mind in such a dizzy crowd, that the multitude of them seemed to take away my senses. I put up my hands to my ears, in which they seemed to be buzzing and rustling like bees, to stop the sound. When I did so, Lecamus turned and looked at me—grave and wondering. This recalled me to a sense of my weakness. But how I got home I can scarcely say. My mother and wife met me with anxiety. They were greatly disturbed about the hospital of St. Jean, in respect to which it had been recently decided that certain changes should be made. The great ward of the hospital, which was the chief establishment for the patients—a thing which some had complained of as an annoyance disturbing their rest. So many, indeed, had been the complaints received, that we had come to the conclusion either that the opening should be built up, or the office suspended. Against this decision, it is needless to say, the Sisters of St. Jean were moving heaven and earth. Equally unnecessary for me to add, that having so decided in my public capacity, as at once the representative of popular opinion and its guide, the covert reproaches which were breathed in my presence, and even the personal appeals made to me, had failed of any result. I respect

the Sisters of St. Jean. They are good women and excellent nurses, and the commune owes them much. Still, justice must be impartial; and so long as I retain my position at the head of the community, it is my duty to see that all have their due. My opinions as a private individual, were I allowed to return to that humble position, are entirely a different matter; but this is a thing which ladies, however excellent, are slow to allow or to understand.

I will not pretend that this was to me a night of rest. In the darkness, when all is still, any anxiety which may afflict the soul is apt to gain complete possession and mastery, as all who have had true experience of life will understand. The night was very dark and very still, the clocks striking out the hours which went so slowly, and not another sound audible. The streets of Semur are always quiet, but they were more still than usual that night. Now and then, in a pause of my thoughts, I could hear the soft breathing of my Agnès in the adjoining room, which gave me a little comfort. But this was only by intervals, when I was able to escape from the grasp of the recollections that held me fast. Again I seemed to see under my closed eyelids the faint line of the high road which led from the Porte St. Lambert, the broken ground with its ragged bushes on either side, and no one—no one there—not a soul, not a shadow: yet a multitude! When I allowed myself to think of this, my heart leaped into my throat again, my blood ran in my veins like a river in flood. I need not say that I resisted this transport of the nerves with all my might. As the

night grew slowly into morning my power of resistance increased; I turned my back, so to speak, upon my recollections, and said to myself, with growing firmness, that all sensations of the body must have their origin in the body. Some derangement of the system easily explainable, no doubt, if one but held the clue—must have produced the impression which otherwise it would be impossible to explain. As I turned this over and over in my mind, carefully avoiding all temptations to excitement—which is the only wise course in the case of a strong impression on the nerves—I gradually became able to believe that this was the cause. It is one of the penalties, I said to myself, which one has to pay for an organisation more finely tempered than that of the crowd.

This long struggle with myself made the night less tedious, though, perhaps, more terrible; and when at length I was overpowered by sleep, the short interval of unconsciousness restored me like a cordial. I woke in the early morning, feeling almost able to smile at the terrors of the night. When one can assure oneself that the day has really begun, even while it is yet dark, there is a change of sensation, an increase of strength and courage. One by one the dark hours went on. I heard them pealing from the Cathedral clock—four, five, six, seven—all dark, dark. I had got up and dressed before the last, but found no one else awake when I went out—no one stirring in the house,—no one moving in the street. The Cathedral doors were shut fast, a thing I have never seen before since I remember. Get up early who will, Père Laserques the sacristan is always up still earlier. He

is a good old man, and I have often heard him say God's house should be open first of all houses, in case there might be any miserable ones about who had found no shelter in the dwellings of men. But the darkness had cheated even Père Laserques. To see those great doors closed which stood always open gave me a shiver, I cannot well tell why. Had they been open, there was an inclination in my mind to have gone in, though I cannot tell why; for I am not in the habit of attending mass, save on Sunday to set an example. There were no shops open, not a sound about. I went out upon the ramparts to the Mont St. Lambert, where the band plays on Sundays. In all the trees there was not so much as the twitter of a bird. I could hear the river flowing swiftly below the wall, but I could not see it, except as something dark, a ravine of gloom below, and beyond the walls I did not venture to look. Why should I look? There was nothing, nothing, as I knew. But fancy is so uncontrollable, and one's nerves so little to be trusted, that it was a wise precaution to refrain. The gloom itself was oppressive enough; the air seemed to creep with apprehensions, and from time to time my heart fluttered with a sick movement, as if it would escape from my control. But everything was still, still as the dead who had been so often in recent days called out of their graves by one or another. 'Enough to bring the dead out of their graves.' What strange words to make use of! It was rather now as if the world had become a grave in which we, though living, were held fast.

Soon after this the dark world began to lighten faintly, and

with the rising of a little white mist, like a veil rolling upwards, I at last saw the river and the fields beyond. To see anything at all lightened my heart a little, and I turned homeward when this faint daylight appeared. When I got back into the street, I found that the people at last were stirring. They had all a look of half panic, half shame upon their faces. Many were yawning and stretching themselves. 'Good morning, M. le Maire,' said one and another; 'you are early astir.' 'Not so early either,' I said; and then they added, almost every individual, with a look of shame, 'We were so late this morning; we overslept ourselves—like yesterday. The weather is extraordinary.' This was repeated to me by all kinds of people. They were half frightened, and they were ashamed. Père Laserques was sitting moaning on the Cathedral steps. Such a thing had never happened before. He had not rung the bell for early mass; he had not opened the Cathedral; he had not called M. le Curé. 'I think I must be going out of my senses,' he said; 'but then, M. le Maire, the weather! Did anyone ever see such weather? I think there must be some evil brewing. It is not for nothing that the seasons change—that winter comes in the midst of summer.'

After this I went home. My mother came running to one door when I entered, and my wife to another. '*O mon fils!*' and '*O mon ami!*' they said, rushing upon me. They wept, these dear women. I could not at first prevail upon them to tell me what was the matter. At last they confessed that they believed something to have happened to me, in punishment for the wrong done to

the Sisters at the hospital. 'Make haste, my son, to amend this error,' my mother cried, 'lest a worse thing befall us!' And then I discovered that among the women, and among many of the poor people, it had come to be believed that the darkness was a curse upon us for what we had done in respect to the hospital. This roused me to indignation. 'If they think I am to be driven from my duty by their magic,' I cried; 'it is no better than witchcraft!' not that I believed for a moment that it was they who had done it. My wife wept, and my mother became angry with me; but when a thing is duty, it is neither wife nor mother who will move me out of my way.

It was a miserable day. There was not light enough to see anything—scarcely to see each other's faces; and to add to our alarm, some travellers arriving by the diligence (we are still three leagues from a railway, while that miserable little place, La Rochette, being the *chef-lieu*, has a terminus) informed me that the darkness only existed in Semur and the neighbourhood, and that within a distance of three miles the sun was shining. The sun was shining! was it possible? it seemed so long since we had seen the sunshine; but this made our calamity more mysterious and more terrible. The people began to gather into little knots in the streets to talk of the strange thing that was happening. In the course of the day M. Barbou came to ask whether I did not think it would be well to appease the popular feeling by conceding what they wished to the Sisters of the hospital. I would not hear of it. 'Shall we own that we are in the wrong? I do not think we are

in the wrong,' I said, and I would not yield. 'Do you think the good Sisters have it in their power to darken the sky with their incantations?' M. l'Adjoint shook his head. He went away with a troubled countenance; but then he was not like myself, a man of natural firmness. All the efforts that were employed to influence him were also employed with me; but to yield to the women was not in my thoughts.

We are now approaching, however, the first important incident in this narrative. The darkness increased as the afternoon came on; and it became a kind of thick twilight, no lighter than many a night. It was between five and six o'clock, just the time when our streets are the most crowded, when, sitting at my window, from which I kept a watch upon the Grande Rue, not knowing what might happen—I saw that some fresh incident had taken place. Very dimly through the darkness I perceived a crowd, which increased every moment, in front of the Cathedral. After watching it for a few minutes, I got my hat and went out. The people whom I saw—so many that they covered the whole middle of the *Place*, reaching almost to the pavement on the other side—had their heads all turned towards the Cathedral. 'What are you gazing at, my friend?' I said to one by whom I stood. He looked up at me with a face which looked ghastly in the gloom. 'Look, M. le Maire!' he said; 'cannot you see it on the great door?'

'I see nothing,' said I; but as I uttered these words I did indeed see something which was very startling. Looking towards the great door of the Cathedral, as they all were doing, it suddenly

seemed to me that I saw an illuminated placard attached to it, headed with the word '*Sommation*' in gigantic letters. '*Tiens!*' I cried; but when I looked again there was nothing. 'What is this? it is some witchcraft!' I said, in spite of myself. 'Do you see anything, Jean Pierre?'

'M. le Maire,' he said, 'one moment one sees something—the next, one sees nothing. Look! it comes again.' I have always considered myself a man of courage, but when I saw this extraordinary appearance the panic which had seized upon me the former night returned, though in another form. Fly I could not, but I will not deny that my knees smote together. I stood for some minutes without being able to articulate a word—which, indeed, seemed the case with most of those before me. Never have I seen a more quiet crowd. They were all gazing, as if it was life or death that was set before them—while I, too, gazed with a shiver going over me. It was as I have seen an illumination of lamps in a stormy night; one moment the whole seems black as the wind sweeps over it, the next it springs into life again; and thus you go on, by turns losing and discovering the device formed by the lights. Thus from moment to moment there appeared before us, in letters that seemed to blaze and flicker, something that looked like a great official placard. '*Sommation!*'—this was how it was headed. I read a few words at a time, as it came and went; and who can describe the chill that ran through my veins as I made it out? It was a summons to the people of Semur by name—myself at the head as Maire (and I heard afterwards

that every man who saw it saw his own name, though the whole *façade* of the Cathedral would not have held a full list of all the people of Semur)—to yield their places, which they had not filled aright, to those who knew the meaning of life, being dead. NOUS AUTRES MORTS—these were the words which blazed out oftenest of all, so that every one saw them. And ‘Go!’ this terrible placard said—‘Go! leave this place to us who know the true signification of life.’ These words I remember, but not the rest; and even at this moment it struck me that there was no explanation, nothing but this *vraie signification de la vie*. I felt like one in a dream: the light coming and going before me; one word, then another, appearing—sometimes a phrase like that I have quoted, blazing out, then dropping into darkness. For the moment I was struck dumb; but then it came back to my mind that I had an example to give, and that for me, eminently a man of my century, to yield credence to a miracle was something not to be thought of. Also I knew the necessity of doing something to break the impression of awe and terror on the mind of the people. ‘This is a trick,’ I cried loudly, that all might hear. ‘Let some one go and fetch M. de Clairon from the Musée. He will tell us how it has been done.’ This, boldly uttered, broke the spell. A number of pale faces gathered round me. ‘Here is M. le Maire—he will clear it up,’ they cried, making room for me that I might approach nearer. ‘M. le Maire is a man of courage—he has judgment. Listen to M. le Maire.’ It was a relief to everybody that I had spoken. And soon I found myself by the side of M.

le Curé, who was standing among the rest, saying nothing, and with the air of one as much bewildered as any of us. He gave me one quick look from under his eyebrows to see who it was that approached him, as was his way, and made room for me, but said nothing. I was in too much emotion myself to keep silence—indeed, I was in that condition of wonder, alarm, and nervous excitement, that I had to speak or die; and there seemed an escape from something too terrible for flesh and blood to contemplate in the idea that there was trickery here. ‘M. le Curé,’ I said, ‘this is a strange ornament that you have placed on the front of your church. You are standing here to enjoy the effect. Now that you have seen how successful it has been, will not you tell me in confidence how it is done?’

I am conscious that there was a sneer in my voice, but I was too much excited to think of politeness. He gave me another of his rapid, keen looks.

‘M. le Maire,’ he said, ‘you are injurious to a man who is as little fond of tricks as yourself.’

His tone, his glance, gave me a certain sense of shame, but I could not stop myself. ‘One knows,’ I said, ‘that there are many things which an ecclesiastic may do without harm, which are not permitted to an ordinary layman—one who is an honest man, and no more.’

M. le Curé made no reply. He gave me another of his quick glances, with an impatient turn of his head. Why should I have suspected him? for no harm was known of him. He was the

Curé, that was all; and perhaps we men of the world have our prejudices too. Afterwards, however, as we waited for M. de Clairon—for the crisis was too exciting for personal resentment—M. le Curé himself let drop something which made it apparent that it was the ladies of the hospital upon whom his suspicions fell. ‘It is never well to offend women, M. le Maire,’ he said. ‘Women do not discriminate the lawful from the unlawful: so long as they produce an effect, it does not matter to them.’ This gave me a strange impression, for it seemed to me that M. le Curé was abandoning his own side. However, all other sentiments were, as may be imagined, but as shadows compared with the overwhelming power that held all our eyes and our thoughts to the wonder before us. Every moment seemed an hour till M. de Clairon appeared. He was pushed forward through the crowd as by magic, all making room for him; and many of us thought that when science thus came forward capable of finding out everything, the miracle would disappear. But instead of this it seemed to glow brighter than ever. That great word ‘*Sommation*’ blazed out, so that we saw his figure waver against the light as if giving way before the flames that scorched him. He was so near that his outline was marked out dark against the glare they gave. It was as though his close approach rekindled every light. Then, with a flicker and trembling, word by word and letter by letter went slowly out before our eyes.

M. de Clairon came down very pale, but with a sort of smile on his face. ‘No, M. le Maire,’ he said, ‘I cannot see how it is

done. It is clever. I will examine the door further, and try the panels. Yes, I have left some one to watch that nothing is touched in the meantime, with the permission of M. le Curé—'

'You have my full permission,' M. le Curé said; and M. de Clairon laughed, though he was still very pale. 'You saw my name there,' he said. 'I am amused—I who am not one of your worthy citizens, M. le Maire. What can Messieurs les Morts of Semur want with a poor man of science like me? But you shall have my report before the evening is out.'

With this I had to be content. The darkness which succeeded to that strange light seemed more terrible than ever. We all stumbled as we turned to go away, dazzled by it, and stricken dumb, though some kept saying that it was a trick, and some murmured exclamations with voices full of terror. The sound of the crowd breaking up was like a regiment marching—all the world had been there. I was thankful, however, that neither my mother nor my wife had seen anything; and though they were anxious to know why I was so serious, I succeeded fortunately in keeping the secret from them.

M. de Clairon did not appear till late, and then he confessed to me he could make nothing of it. 'If it is a trick (as of course it must be), it has been most cleverly done,' he said; and admitted that he was baffled altogether. For my part, I was not surprised. Had it been the Sisters of the hospital, as M. le Curé thought, would they have let the opportunity pass of preaching a sermon to us, and recommending their doctrines? Not so; here there

were no doctrines, nothing but that pregnant phrase, *la vraie signification de la vie*. This made a more deep impression upon me than anything else. The Holy Mother herself (whom I wish to speak of with profound respect), and the saints, and the forgiveness of sins, would have all been there had it been the Sisters, or even M. le Curé. This, though I had myself suggested an imposture, made it very unlikely to my quiet thoughts. But if not an imposture, what could it be supposed to be?

# EXPULSION OF THE INHABITANTS

I will not attempt to give any detailed account of the state of the town during this evening. For myself I was utterly worn out, and went to rest as soon as M. de Clairon left me, having satisfied, as well as I could, the questions of the women. Even in the intensest excitement weary nature will claim her dues. I slept. I can even remember the grateful sense of being able to put all anxieties and perplexities aside for the moment, as I went to sleep. I felt the drowsiness gain upon me, and I was glad. To forget was of itself a happiness. I woke up, however, intensely awake, and in perfect possession of all my faculties, while it was yet dark; and at once got up and began to dress. The moment of hesitation which generally follows waking—the little interval of thought in which one turns over perhaps that which is past, perhaps that which is to come—found no place within me. I got up without a moment's pause, like one who has been called to go on a journey; nor did it surprise me at all to see my wife moving about, taking a cloak from her wardrobe, and putting up linen in a bag. She was already fully dressed; but she asked no questions of me any more than I did of her. We were in haste, though we said nothing. When I had dressed, I looked round me to see if I had forgotten anything, as one does

when one leaves a place. I saw my watch suspended to its usual hook, and my pocketbook, which I had taken from my pocket on the previous night. I took up also the light overcoat which I had worn when I made my rounds through the city on the first night of the darkness. ‘Now,’ I said, ‘Agnès, I am ready.’ I did not speak to her of where we were going, nor she to me. Little Jean and my mother met us at the door. Nor did *she* say anything, contrary to her custom; and the child was quite quiet. We went downstairs together without saying a word. The servants, who were all astir, followed us. I cannot give any description of the feelings that were in my mind. I had not any feelings. I was only hurried out, hastened by something which I could not define—a sense that I must go; and perhaps I was too much astonished to do anything but yield. It seemed, however, to be no force or fear that was moving me, but a desire of my own; though I could not tell how it was, or why I should be so anxious to get away. All the servants, trooping after me, had the same look in their faces; they were anxious to be gone—it seemed their business to go—there was no question, no consultation. And when we came out into the street, we encountered a stream of processions similar to our own. The children went quite steadily by the side of their parents. Little Jean, for example, on an ordinary occasion would have broken away—would have run to his comrades of the Bois-Sombre family, and they to him. But no; the little ones, like ourselves, walked along quite gravely. They asked no questions, neither did we ask any questions of each other, as, ‘Where are

you going?’ or, ‘What is the meaning of a so-early promenade?’ Nothing of the kind; my mother took my arm, and my wife, leading little Jean by the hand, came to the other side. The servants followed. The street was quite full of people; but there was no noise except the sound of their footsteps. All of us turned the same way—turned towards the gates—and though I was not conscious of any feeling except the wish to go on, there were one or two things which took a place in my memory. The first was, that my wife suddenly turned round as we were coming out of the *porte-cochère*

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