ÉMILE ZOLA

THE THREE CITIES TRILOGY: LOURDES, VOLUME 5

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LOURDE
THE FIFTH DAY

I

EGOTISM AND LOVE

AGAIN that night Pierre, at the Hotel of the Apparitions, was unable to obtain a wink of sleep. After calling at the hospital to inquire after Marie, who, since her return from the procession, had been soundly enjoying the delicious, restoring sleep of a child, he had gone to bed himself feeling anxious at the prolonged absence of M. de Guersaint. He had expected him at latest at dinner-time, but probably some mischance had detained him at Gavarnie; and he thought how disappointed Marie would be if her father were not there to embrace her the first thing in

the morning. With a man like M. de Guersaint, so pleasantly heedless and so hare-brained, everything was possible, every fear might be realised.

Perhaps this anxiety had at first sufficed to keep Pierre awake in spite of his great fatigue; but afterwards the nocturnal noises of the hotel had really assumed unbearable proportions. The morrow, Tuesday, was the day of departure, the last day which the national pilgrimage would spend at Lourdes, and the pilgrims no doubt were making the most of their time, coming from the Grotto and returning thither in the middle of the night, endeavouring as it were to force the grace of Heaven by their commotion, and apparently never feeling the slightest need of repose. The doors slammed, the floors shook, the entire building vibrated beneath the disorderly gallop of a crowd. Never before had the walls reverberated with such obstinate coughs, such thick, husky voices. Thus Pierre, a prey to insomnia, tossed about on his bed and continually rose up, beset with the idea that the noise he heard must have been made by M. de Guersaint who had returned. For some minutes he would listen feverishly; but he could only hear the extraordinary sounds of the passage, amid which he could distinguish nothing precisely. Was it the priest, the mother and her three daughters, or the old married couple on his left, who were fighting with the furniture? or was it rather the larger family, or the single gentleman, or the young single woman on his right, whom some incomprehensible occurrences were leading into adventures? At one moment he jumped from

his bed, wishing to explore his absent friend's empty room, as he felt certain that some deeds of violence were taking place in it. But although he listened very attentively when he got there, the only sound he could distinguish was the tender caressing murmur of two voices. Then a sudden recollection of Madame Volmar came to him, and he returned shuddering to bed.

At length, when it was broad daylight and Pierre had just fallen asleep, a loud knocking at his door awoke him with a start. This time there could be no mistake, a loud voice broken by sobs was calling "Monsieur l'Abbe! Monsieur l'Abbe! for Heaven's sake wake up!"

Surely it must be M. de Guersaint who had been brought back dead, at least. Quite scared, Pierre ran and opened the door, in his night-shirt, and found himself in the presence of his neighbour, M. Vigneron.

"Oh! for Heaven's sake, Monsieur l'Abbe, dress yourself at once!" exclaimed the, assistant head-clerk. "Your holy ministry is required." And he began to relate that he had just got up to see the time by his watch on the mantelpiece, when he had heard some most frightful sighs issuing from the adjoining room, where Madame Chaise slept. She had left the communicating door open in order to be more with them, as she pleasantly expressed it. Accordingly he had hastened in, and flung the shutters open so as to admit both light and air. "And what a sight, Monsieur l'Abbe!" he continued. "Our poor aunt lying on her bed, nearly purple in the face already, her mouth wide open in a vain effort to breathe,

and her hands fumbling with the sheet. It's her heart complaint, you know. Come, come at once, Monsieur l'Abbe, and help her, I implore you!"

Pierre, utterly bewildered, could find neither his breeches nor his cassock. "Of course, of course I'll come with you," said he. "But I have not what is necessary for administering the last sacraments."

M. Vigneron had assisted him to dress, and was now stooping down looking for his slippers. "Never mind," he said, "the mere sight of you will assist her in her last moments, if Heaven has this affliction in store for us. Here! put these on your feet, and follow me at once – oh! at once!"

He went off like a gust of wind and plunged into the adjoining room. All the doors remained wide open. The young priest, who followed him, noticed nothing in the first room, which was in an incredible state of disorder, beyond the half-naked figure of little Gustave, who sat on the sofa serving him as a bed, motionless, very pale, forgotten, and shivering amid this drama of inexorable death. Open bags littered the floor, the greasy remains of supper soiled the table, the parents' bed seemed devastated by the catastrophe, its coverlets torn off and lying on the floor. And almost immediately afterwards he caught sight of the mother, who had hastily enveloped herself in an old yellow dressing-gown, standing with a terrified look in the inner room.

"Well, my love, well, my love?" repeated M. Vigneron, in stammering accents.

With a wave of her hand and without uttering a word Madame Vigneron drew their attention to Madame Chaise, who lay motionless, with her head sunk in the pillow and her hands stiffened and twisted. She was blue in the face, and her mouth gaped, as though with the last great gasp that had come from her.

Pierre bent over her. Then in a low voice he said: "She is dead!"

Dead! The word rang through the room where a heavy silence reigned, and the husband and wife looked at each other in amazement, bewilderment. So it was over? The aunt had died before Gustave, and the youngster inherited her five hundred thousand francs. How many times had they dwelt on that dream; whose sudden realisation dumfounded them? How many times had despair overcome them when they feared that the poor child might depart before her? Dead! Good heavens! was it their fault? Had they really prayed to the Blessed Virgin for this? She had shown herself so good to them that they trembled at the thought that they had not been able to express a wish without its being granted. In the death of the chief clerk, so suddenly carried off so that they might have his place, they had already recognised the powerful hand of Our Lady of Lourdes. Had she again loaded them with favours, listening even to the unconscious dreams of their desire? Yet they had never desired anyone's death; they were worthy people incapable of any bad action, loving their relations, fulfilling their religious duties, going to confession, partaking of the communion like other people without any ostentation.

Whenever they thought of those five hundred thousand francs, of their son who might be the first to go, and of the annoyance it would be to them to see another and far less worthy nephew inherit that fortune, it was merely in the innermost recesses of their hearts, in short, quite innocently and naturally. Certainly they /had/ thought of it when they were at the Grotto, but was not the Blessed Virgin wisdom itself? Did she not know far better than ourselves what she ought to do for the happiness of both the living and the dead?

Then Madame Vigneron in all sincerity burst into tears and wept for the sister whom she loved so much. "Ah! Monsieur l'Abbe," she said, "I saw her expire; she passed away before my eyes. What a misfortune that you were not here sooner to receive her soul! She died without a priest; your presence would have consoled her so much."

A prey also to emotion, his eyes full of tears, Vigneron sought to console his wife. "Your sister was a saint," said he; "she communicated again yesterday morning, and you need have no anxiety concerning her; her soul has gone straight to heaven. No doubt, if Monsieur l'Abbe had been here in time she would have been glad to see him. But what would you? Death was quicker. I went at once, and really there is nothing for us to reproach ourselves with."

Then, turning towards the priest, he added "Monsieur l'Abbe, it was her excessive piety which certainly hastened her end. Yesterday, at the Grotto, she had a bad attack, which was a

warning. And in spite of her fatigue she obstinately followed the procession afterwards. I thought then that she could not last long. Yet, out of delicacy, one did not like to say anything to her, for fear of frightening her."

Pierre gently knelt down and said the customary prayers, with that human emotion which was his nearest approach to faith in the presence of eternal life and eternal death, both so pitiful. Then, as he remained kneeling a little longer, he overheard snatches of the conversation around him.

Little Gustave, forgotten on his couch amid the disorder of the other room, must have lost patience, for he had begun to cry and call out, "Mamma! mamma! mamma!"

At length Madame Vigneron went to quiet him, and it occurred to her to carry him in her arms to kiss his poor aunt for the last time. But at first he struggled and refused, crying so much that M. Vigneron was obliged to interfere and try to make him ashamed of himself. What! he who was never frightened of anything! who bore suffering with the courage of a grown-up man! And to think it was a question of kissing his poor aunt, who had always been so kind, whose last thought must most certainly have been for him!

"Give him to me," said he to his wife; "he's going to be good."

Gustave ended by clinging to his father's neck. He came shivering in his night-shirt, displaying his wretched little body devoured by scrofula. It seemed indeed as though the miraculous water of the piscinas, far from curing him, had freshened the sore

on his back; whilst his scraggy leg hung down inertly like a dry stick.

"Kiss her," resumed M. Vigneron.

The child leant forward and kissed his aunt on the forehead. It was not death which upset him and caused him to struggle. Since he had been in the room he had been looking at the dead woman with an air of quiet curiosity. He did not love her, he had suffered on her account so long. He had the ideas and feelings of a man, and the weight of them was stifling him as, like his complaint, they developed and became more acute. He felt full well that he was too little, that children ought not to understand what only concerns their elders.

However, his father, seating himself out of the way, kept him on his knee, whilst his mother closed the window and lit the two candles on the mantelpiece. "Ah! my poor dear," murmured M. Vigneron, feeling that he must say something, "it's a cruel loss for all of us. Our trip is now completely spoilt; this is our last day, for we start this afternoon. And the Blessed Virgin, too, was showing herself so kind to us."

However, seeing his son's surprised look, a look of infinite sadness and reproach, he hastened to add: "Yes, of course, I know that she hasn't yet quite cured you. But we must not despair of her kindness. She loves us so well, she shows us so many favours that she will certainly end by curing you, since that is now the only favour that remains for her to grant us."

Madame Vigneron, who was listening, drew near and said:

"How happy we should have been to have returned to Paris all three hale and hearty! Nothing is ever perfect!"

"I say!" suddenly observed Monsieur Vigneron, "I sha'n't be able to leave with you this afternoon, on account of the formalities which have to be gone through. I hope that my return ticket will still be available to-morrow!"

They were both getting over the frightful shock, feeling a sense of relief in spite of their affection for Madame Chaise; and, in fact, they were already forgetting her, anxious above all things to leave Lourdes as soon as possible, as though the principal object of their journey had been attained. A decorous, unavowed delight was slowly penetrating them.

"When I get back to Paris there will be so much for me to do," continued M. Vigneron. "I, who now only long for repose! All the same I shall remain my three years at the Ministry, until I can retire, especially now that I am certain of the retiring pension of chief clerk. But afterwards – oh! afterwards I certainly hope to enjoy life a bit. Since this money has come to us I shall purchase the estate of Les Billottes, that superb property down at my native place which I have always been dreaming of. And I promise you that I sha'n't find time hanging heavy on my hands in the midst of my horses, my dogs, and my flowers!"

Little Gustave was still on his father's knee, his night-shirt tucked up, his whole wretched misshapen body shivering, and displaying the scragginess of a slowly dying child. When he perceived that his father, now full of his dream of an opulent life,

no longer seemed to notice that he was there, he gave one of his enigmatical smiles, in which melancholy was tinged with malice. "But what about me, father?" he asked.

M. Vigneron started, like one aroused from sleep, and did not at first seem to understand. "You, little one? You'll be with us, of course!"

But Gustave gave him a long, straight look, without ceasing to smile with his artful, though woeful lips. "Oh! do you think so?" he asked.

"Of course I think so! You'll be with us, and it will be very nice to be with us."

Uneasy, stammering, unable to find the proper words, M. Vigneron felt a chill come over him when his son shrugged his skinny shoulders with an air of philosophical disdain and answered: "Oh, no! I shall be dead."

And then the terrified father was suddenly able to detect in the child's deep glance the glance of a man who was very aged, very knowing in all things, acquainted with all the abominations of life through having gone through them. What especially alarmed him was the abrupt conviction that this child had always seen into the innermost recesses of his heart, even farther than the things he dared to acknowledge to himself. He could recall that when the little sufferer had been but a baby in his cradle his eyes would frequently be fixed upon his own – and even then those eyes had been rendered so sharp by suffering, endowed, too, with such an extraordinary power of divination, that they had

seemed able to dive into the unconscious thoughts buried in the depths of his brain. And by a singular counter-effect all the things that he had never owned to himself he now found in his child's eyes – he beheld them, read them there, against his will. The story of his cupidity lay unfolded before him, his anger at having such a sorry son, his anguish at the idea that Madame Chaise's fortune depended upon such a fragile existence, his eager desire that she might make haste and die whilst the youngster was still there, in order that he might finger the legacy. It was simply a question of days, this duel as to which should go off first. And then, at the end, it still meant death – the youngster must in his turn disappear, whilst he, the father, alone pocketed the cash, and lived joyfully to a good old age. And these frightful things shone forth so clearly from the keen, melancholy, smiling eyes of the poor condemned child, passed from son to father with such evident distinctness, that for a moment it seemed to them that they were shouting them aloud.

However, M. Vigneron struggled against it all, and, averting his head, began energetically protesting: "How! You'll be dead? What an idea! It's absurd to have such ideas as that!"

Meantime, Madame Vigneron was sobbing. "You wicked child," she gasped; "how can you make us so unhappy, when we already have such a cruel loss to deplore?"

Gustave had to kiss them, and to promise them that he would live for their sakes. Yet he did not cease smiling, conscious as he was that a lie is necessary when one does not wish to be too

miserable, and quite prepared, moreover, to leave his parents happy behind him, since even the Blessed Virgin herself was powerless to grant him in this world the little happy lot to which each creature should be born.

His mother took him back to bed, and Pierre at length rose up, just as M. Vigneron had finished arranging the chamber of death in a suitable manner. "You'll excuse me, won't you, Monsieur l'Abbe?" said he, accompanying the young priest to the door. "I'm not quite myself. Well, it's an unpleasant time to go through. I must get over it somehow, however."

When Pierre got into the passage he stopped for a moment, listening to a sound of voices which was ascending the stairs. He had just been thinking of M. de Guersaint again, and imagined that he could recognise his voice. However, whilst he stood there waiting, an incident occurred which caused him intense discomfort. The door of the room next to M. de Guersaint's softly opened and a woman, clad in black, slipped into the passage. As she turned, she found herself face to face with Pierre, in such a fashion that it was impossible for them to pretend not to recognise each other.

The woman was Madame Volmar. Six o'clock had not yet struck, and she was going off, hoping that nobody would notice her, with the intention of showing herself at the hospital, and there spending this last morning, in order, in some measure, to justify her journey to Lourdes. When she perceived Pierre, she began to tremble, and, at first, could only stammer: "Oh,

Monsieur l'Abbe, Monsieur l'Abbe!"

Then, noticing that the priest had left his door wide open, she seemed to give way to the fever consuming her, to a need of speaking out, explaining things and justifying herself. With her face suffused by a rush of blood she entered the young man's room, whither he had to follow her, greatly disturbed by this strange adventure. And, as he still left the door open, it was she who, in her desire to confide her sorrow and her sin to him, begged that he would close it.

"Oh! I pray you, Monsieur l'Abbe," said she, "do not judge me too harshly."

He made a gesture as though to reply that he did not allow himself the right to pass judgment upon her.

"But yes, but yes," she responded; "I know very well that you are acquainted with my misfortune. You saw me once in Paris behind the church of La Trinite, and the other day you recognised me on the balcony here! You were aware that I was there – in that room. But if you only knew – ah, if you only knew!"

Her lips were quivering, and tears were welling into her eyes. As he looked at her he was surprised by the extraordinary beauty transfiguring her face. This woman, invariably clad in black, extremely simple, with never a jewel, now appeared to him in all the brilliancy of her passion; no longer drawing back into the gloom, no longer seeking to bedim the lustre of her eyes, as was her wont. She, who at first sight did not seem pretty, but too dark and slender, with drawn features, a large mouth and long nose,

assumed, as he now examined her, a troubling charm, a powerful, irresistible beauty. Her eyes especially – her large, magnificent eyes, whose brasiers she usually sought to cover with a veil of indifference – were flaring like torches; and he understood that she should be loved, adored, to madness.

"If you only knew, Monsieur l'Abbe," she continued. "If I were only to tell you all that I have suffered. Doubtless you have suspected something of it, since you are acquainted with my mother-in-law and my husband. On the few occasions when you have called on us you cannot but have understood some of the abominable things which go on in my home, though I have always striven to appear happy in my silent little corner. But to live like that for ten years, to have no existence – never to love, never to be loved – no, no, it was beyond my power!"

And then she related the whole painful story: her marriage with the diamond merchant, a disastrous, though it seemed an advantageous one; her mother-in-law, with the stern soul of a jailer or an executioner, and her husband, a monster of physical ugliness and mental villainy. They imprisoned her, they did not even allow her to look out of a window. They had beaten her, they had pitilessly assailed her in her tastes, her inclinations, in all her feminine weaknesses. She knew that her husband wandered in his affections, and yet if she smiled to a relative, if she had a flower in her corsage on some rare day of gaiety, he would tear it from her, enter into the most jealous rage, and seize and bruise her wrists whilst shouting the most fearful threats. For years and

years she had lived in that hell, hoping, hoping still, having within her such a power of life, such an ardent need of affection, that she continued waiting for happiness, ever thinking, at the faintest breath, that it was about to enter.

"I swear to you, Monsieur l'Abbe," said she, "that I could not do otherwise than I have done. I was too unhappy: my whole being longed for someone who would care for me. And when my friend the first time told me that he loved me it was all over – I was his forever. Ah! to be loved, to be spoken to gently, to have someone near you who is always solicitous and amiable; to know that in absence he thinks of you, that there is a heart somewhere in which you live.. Ah! if it be a crime, Monsieur l'Abbe, I cannot, cannot feel remorse for it. I will not even say that I was urged to it; I simply say that it came to me as naturally as my breath, because it was as necessary to my life!"

She had carried her hand to her lips as though to throw a kiss to the world, and Pierre felt deeply disturbed in presence of this lovely woman, who personified all the ardour of human passion, and at the same time a feeling of deep pity began to arise within him.

"Poor woman!" he murmured.

"It is not to the priest that I am confessing," she resumed; "it is to the man that I am speaking, to a man by whom I should greatly like to be understood. No, I am not a believer: religion has not sufficed me. It is said that some women find contentment in it, a firm protection even against all transgressions. But I have

ever felt cold in church, weary unto death. Oh! I know very well that it is wrong to feign piety, to mingle religion with my heart affairs. But what would you? I am forced to it. If you saw me in Paris behind La Trinite it was because that church is the only place to which I am allowed to go alone; and if you find me here at Lourdes it is because, in the whole long year, I have but these three days of happiness and freedom."

Again she began to tremble. Hot tears were coursing down her cheeks. A vision of it all arose in Pierre's mind, and, distracted by the thought of the ardent earthly love which possessed this unhappy creature, he again murmured: "Poor woman!"

"And, Monsieur l'Abbe," she continued, "think of the hell to which I am about to return! For weeks and months I live my life of martyrdom without complaint. Another year, another year must go by without a day, an hour of happiness! Ah! I am indeed very unhappy, Monsieur l'Abbe, yet do you not think all the same that I am a good woman?"

He had been deeply moved by her sincere display of mingled grief and passion. He felt in her the breath of universal desire – a sovereign flame. And his compassion overflowed from his heart, and his words were words of pardon. "Madame," he said, "I pity you and respect you infinitely."

Then she spoke no further, but looked at him with her large tear-blurred eyes. And suddenly catching hold of both his hands, she grasped them tightly with her burning fingers. And then she went off, vanishing down the passage as light, as ethereal, as a

shadow.

However, Pierre suffered from her presence in that room even more acutely after she had departed. He opened the window wide that the fresh air might carry off the breath of passion which she had left there. Already on the Sunday when he had seen her on the balcony he had been seized with terror at the thought that she personified the revenge of the world and the flesh amidst all the mystical exaltation of immaculate Lourdes. And now his terror was returning to him. Love seemed stronger than faith, and perhaps it was only love that was divine. To love, to belong to one another, to create and continue life – was not that the one sole object of nature outside of all social and religious policies? For a moment he was conscious of the abyss before him: his chastity was his last prop, the very dignity of his spoilt life; and he realised that, if after yielding to his reason he also yielded to his flesh, he would be utterly lost. All his pride of purity, all his strength which he had placed in professional rectitude, thereupon returned to him, and he again vowed that he would never be a man, since he had voluntarily cut himself off from among men.

Seven o'clock was striking, and Pierre did not go back to bed, but began to wash himself, thoroughly enjoying the cool water, which ended by calming his fever. As he finished dressing, the anxious thought of M. de Guersaint recurred to him on hearing a sound of footsteps in the passage. These steps stopped outside his room and someone knocked. With a feeling of relief he went to open the door, but on doing so exclaimed in great surprise

"What, it's you! How is it that you're already up, running about to see people?"

Marie stood on the threshold smiling, whilst behind her was Sister Hyacinthe, who had come with her, and who also was smiling, with her lovely, candid eyes.

"Ah! my friend," said the girl, "I could not remain in bed. I sprang out directly I saw the sunshine. I had such a longing to walk, to run and jump about like a child, and I begged and implored so much that Sister was good enough to come with me. I think I should have got out through the window if the door had been closed against me."

Pierre ushered them in, and an indescribable emotion oppressed him as he heard her jest so gaily and saw her move about so freely with such grace and liveliness. She, good heavens! she whom he had seen for years with lifeless legs and colourless face! Since he had left her the day before at the Basilica she had blossomed into full youth and beauty. One night had sufficed for him to find again, developed it is true, the sweet creature whom he had loved so tenderly, the superb, radiant child whom he had embraced so wildly in the by-gone days behind the flowering hedge, beneath the sun-flecked trees.

"How tall and lovely you are, Marie!" said he, in spite of himself.

Then Sister Hyacinthe interposed: "Hasn't the Blessed Virgin done things well, Monsieur l'Abbe? When she takes us in hand, you see, she turns us out as fresh as roses and smelling quite as

sweet."

"Ah!" resumed Marie, "I'm so happy; I feel quite strong and well and spotless, as though I had just been born!"

All this was very delicious to Pierre. It seemed to him that the atmosphere was now truly purified of Madame Volmar's presence. Marie filled the room with her candour, with the perfume and brightness of her innocent youth. And yet the joy he felt at the sight of pure beauty and life reflowering was not exempt from sadness. For, after all, the revolt which he had felt in the crypt, the wound of his wrecked life, must forever leave him a bleeding heart. As he gazed upon all that resuscitated grace, as the woman he loved thus reappeared before him in the flower of her youth, he could not but remember that she would never be his, that he belonged no longer to the world, but to the grave. However, he no longer lamented; he experienced a boundless melancholy – a sensation of utter nothingness as he told himself that he was dead, that this dawn of beauty was rising on the tomb in which his manhood slept. It was renunciation, accepted, resolved upon amidst all the desolate grandeur attaching to those lives which are led contrary to nature's law. Then, like the other woman, the impassioned one, Marie took hold of Pierre's hands. But hers were so soft, so fresh, so soothing! She looked at him with so little confusion and a great longing which she dared not express. After a while, however, she summoned up her courage and said: "Will you kiss me, Pierre? It would please me so much."

He shuddered, his heart crushed by this last torture. Ah! the

kisses of other days – those kisses which had ever lingered on his lips! Never since had he kissed her, and to-day she was like a sister flinging her arms around his neck. She kissed him with a loud smack on both his cheeks, and offering her own, insisted on his doing likewise to her. So twice, in his turn, he embraced her.

"I, too, Marie," said he, "am pleased, very pleased, I assure you." And then, overcome by emotion, his courage exhausted, whilst at the same time filled with delight and bitterness, he burst into sobs, weeping with his face buried in his hands, like a child seeking to hide its tears.

"Come, come, we must not give way," said Sister Hyacinthe, gaily. "Monsieur l'Abbe would feel too proud if he fancied that we had merely come on his account. M. de Guersaint is about, isn't he?"

Marie raised a cry of deep affection. "Ah! my dear father! After all, it's he who'll be most pleased!"

Thereupon Pierre had to relate that M. de Guersaint had not returned from his excursion to Gavarnie. His increasing anxiety showed itself while he spoke, although he sought to explain his friend's absence, surmising all sorts of obstacles and unforeseen complications. Marie, however, did not seem afraid, but again laughed, saying that her father never could be punctual. Still she was extremely eager for him to see her walking, to find her on her legs again, resuscitated, in the fresh blossoming of her youth.

All at once Sister Hyacinthe, who had gone to lean over the balcony, returned to the room, saying "Here he comes! He's

down below, just alighting from his carriage."

"Ah!" cried Marie, with the eager playfulness of a school-girl, "let's give him a surprise. Yes, we must hide, and when he's here we'll show ourselves all of a sudden."

With these words, she hastily dragged Sister Hyacinthe into the adjoining room.

Almost immediately afterwards, M. de Guersaint entered like a whirlwind from the passage, the door communicating with which had been quickly opened by Pierre, and, shaking the young priest's hand, the belated excursionist exclaimed: "Here I am at last! Ah! my friend, you can't have known what to think since four o'clock yesterday, when you expected me back, eh? But you have no idea of the adventures we have had. To begin with, one of the wheels of our landau came off just as we reached Gavarnie; then, yesterday evening – though we managed to start off again – a frightful storm detained us all night long at Saint-Sauveur. I wasn't able to sleep a wink." Then, breaking off, he inquired, "And you, are you all right?"

"I wasn't able to sleep either," said the priest; "they made such a noise in the hotel."

But M. de Guersaint had already started off again: "All the same, it was delightful. I must tell you; you can't imagine it. I was with three delightful churchmen. Abbe des Hermoises is certainly the most charming man I know. Oh! we did laugh – we did laugh!"

Then he again stopped, to inquire, "And how's my daughter?"

Thereupon a clear laugh behind him caused him to turn round, and he remained with his mouth wide open. Marie was there, and was walking, with a look of rapturous delight upon her face, which was beaming with health. He had never for a moment doubted the miracle, and was not in the least surprised that it had taken place, for he had returned with the conviction that everything would end well, and that he would surely find her cured. But what so utterly astounded him was the prodigious spectacle which he had not foreseen: his daughter, looking so beautiful, so divine, in her little black gown! – his daughter, who had not even brought a hat with her, and merely had a piece of lace tied over her lovely fair hair! – his daughter, full of life, blooming, triumphant, similar to all the daughters of all the fathers whom he had envied for so many years!

"O my child! O my child!" he exclaimed.

And, as she had flown into his arms, he pressed her to his heart, and then they fell upon their knees together. Everything disappeared from before them in a radiant effusion of faith and love. This heedless, hare-brained man, who fell asleep instead of accompanying his daughter to the Grotto, who went off to Gavarnie on the day the Blessed Virgin was to cure her, overflowed with such paternal affection, with such Christian faith so exalted by thankfulness, that for a moment he appeared sublime.

"O Jesus! O Mary! let me thank you for having restored my child to me! O my child, we shall never have breath enough,

soul enough, to render thanks to Mary and Jesus for the great happiness they have vouchsafed us! O my child, whom they have resuscitated, O my child, whom they have made so beautiful again, take my heart to offer it to them with your own! I am yours, I am theirs eternally, O my beloved child, my adored child!"

Kneeling before the open window they both, with uplifted eyes, gazed ardently on heaven. The daughter had rested her head on her father's shoulder; whilst he had passed an arm round her waist. They had become one. Tears slowly trickled down their enraptured faces, which were smiling with superhuman felicity, whilst they stammered together disconnected expressions of gratitude.

"O Jesus, we give Thee thanks! O Holy Mother of Jesus, we give thee thanks! We love you, we adore you both. You have rejuvenated the best blood in our veins; it is yours, it circulates only for you. O All-powerful Mother, O Divine and Well-beloved Son, behold a daughter and a father who bless you, who prostrate themselves with joy at your feet."

So affecting was this mingling of two beings, happy at last after so many dark days, this happiness, which could but stammer as though still tinged with suffering, that Pierre was again moved to tears. But this time they were soothing tears which relieved his heart. Ah! poor pitiable humanity! how pleasant it was to see it somewhat consoled and enraptured! and what did it matter, after all, if its great joys of a few seconds' duration sprang from the eternal illusion! Was not the whole of humanity, pitiable

humanity, saved by love, personified by that poor childish man who suddenly became sublime because he found his daughter resuscitated?

Standing a little aside, Sister Hyacinthe was also weeping, her heart very full, full of human emotion which she had never before experienced, she who had known no other parents than the Almighty and the Blessed Virgin. Silence had now fallen in this room full of so much tearful fraternity. And it was she who spoke the first, when the father and the daughter, overcome with emotion, at length rose up.

"Now, mademoiselle," she said, "we must be quick and get back to the hospital."

But they all protested. M. de Guersaint wished to keep his daughter with him, and Marie's eyes expressed an eager desire, a longing to enjoy life, to walk and ramble through the whole vast world.

"Oh! no, no!" said the father, "I won't give her back to you. We'll each have a cup of milk, for I'm dying of thirst; then we'll go out and walk about. Yes, yes, both of us! She shall take my arm, like a little woman!"

Sister Hyacinthe laughed again. "Very well!" said she, "I'll leave her with you, and tell the ladies that you've stolen her from me. But for my own part I must be off. You've no idea what an amount of work we have to get through at the hospital if we are to be ready in time to leave: there are all the patients and things to be seen to; and all is in the greatest confusion!"

"So to-day's really Tuesday, and we leave this afternoon?" asked Monsieur de Guersaint, already absent-minded again.

"Of course we do, and don't forget! The white train starts at 3.40. And if you're sensible you'll bring your daughter back early so that she may have a little rest."

Marie walked with the Sister to the door, saying "Be easy, I will be very good. Besides, I want to go back to the Grotto, to thank the Blessed Virgin once more."

When they found themselves all three alone in the little room full of sunshine, it was delicious. Pierre called the servant and told her to bring them some milk, some chocolate, and cakes, in fact the nicest things he could think of. And although Marie had already broken her fast, she ate again, so great an appetite had come upon her since the night before. They drew the table to the window and made quite a feast amidst the keen air from the mountains, whilst the hundred bells of Lourdes, proclaimed with flying peals the glory of that radiant day. They chattered and laughed, and the young woman told her father the story of the miracle, with all the oft-repeated details. She related, too, how she had left her box at the Basilica, and how she had slept twelve hours without stirring. Then M. de Guersaint on his side wished to relate his excursion, but got mixed and kept coming back to the miracle. Finally, it appeared that the Cirque de Gavarnie was something colossal. Only, when you looked at it from a distance it seemed small, for you lost all sense of proportion. The gigantic snow-covered tiers of cliffs, the topmost ridge standing

out against the sky with the outlines of some cyclopean fortress with razed keep and jagged ramparts, the great cascade, whose ceaseless jet seemed so slow when in reality it must have rushed down with a noise like thunder, the whole immensity, the forests on right and left, the torrents and the landslips, looked as though they might have been held in the palm of one's hand, when one gazed upon them from the village market-place. And what had impressed him most, what he repeatedly alluded to, were the strange figures described by the snow, which had remained up there amongst the rocks. Amongst others was a huge crucifix, a white cross, several thousand yards in length, which you might have thought had been thrown across the amphitheatre from one end to the other.

However, all at once M. de Guersaint broke off to inquire: "By the way, what's happening at our neighbour's? As I came upstairs a little while ago I met Monsieur Vigneron running about like a madman; and, through the open doorway of their room, I fancied I saw Madame Vigneron looking very red. Has their son Gustave had another attack?"

Pierre had quite forgotten Madame Chaise lying dead on the other side of the partition. He seemed to feel a cold breath pass over him. "No, no," he answered, "the child is all right." And he said no more, preferring to remain silent. Why spoil this happy hour of new life and reconquered youth by mingling with it the image of death? However, from that moment he himself could not cease thinking of the proximity of nothingness. And

he thought, too, of that other room where Madame Volmar's friend was now alone, stifling his sobs with his lips pressed upon a pair of gloves which he had stolen from her. All the sounds of the hotel were now becoming audible again – the coughs, the sighs, the indistinct voices, the continual slamming of doors, the creaking of the floors beneath the great accumulation of travellers, and all the stir in the passages, along which flying skirts were sweeping, and families galloping distractedly amidst the hurry-scurry of departure.

"On my word! you'll do yourself an injury," all at once cried Monsieur de Guersaint, on seeing his daughter take up another cake.

Marie was quite merry too. But at a sudden thought tears came into her eyes, and she exclaimed: "Ah! how glad I am! but also how sorry when I think that everybody is not as pleased as myself."

II

PLEASANT HOURS

IT was eight o'clock, and Marie was so impatient that she could not keep still, but continued going to the window, as if she wished to inhale all the air of the vast, expanse and the immense sky. Ah! what a pleasure to be able to run about the streets, across the squares, to go everywhere as far as she might wish. And to show how strong she was, to have the pride of walking leagues in the presence of everyone, now that the Blessed Virgin had cured her! It was an irresistible impulsion, a flight of her entire being, her blood, and her heart.

However, just as she was setting out she made up her mind that her first visit with her father ought to be to the Grotto, where both of them had to thank Our Lady of Lourdes. Then they would be free; they would have two long hours before them, and might walk wherever they chose, before she returned to lunch and pack up her few things at the hospital.

"Well, is everyone ready?" repeated M. de Guersaint. "Shall we make a move?"

Pierre took his hat, and all three went down-stairs, talking very loud and laughing on the staircase, like boisterous school-boys going for their holidays. They had almost reached the street,

when at the doorway Madame Majeste rushed forward. She had evidently been waiting for them to go out.

"Ah! mademoiselle; ah! gentlemen, allow me to congratulate you," she said. "We have heard of the extraordinary favour that has been granted you; we are so happy, so much flattered, when the Blessed Virgin is pleased to select one of our customers!"

Her dry, harsh face was melting with amiability, and she observed the miraculously healed girl with the fondest of eyes. Then she impulsively called her husband, who was passing: "Look, my dear! It's mademoiselle; it's mademoiselle."

Majeste's clean-shaven face, puffed out with yellow fat, assumed a happy and grateful expression. "Really, mademoiselle, I cannot tell you how honoured we feel," said he. "We shall never forget that your papa put up at our place. It has already excited the envy of many people."

While he spoke Madame Majeste stopped the other travellers who were going out, and with a sign summoned the families already seated in the dining-room; indeed, she would have called in the whole street if they had given her time, to show that she had in her house the miracle at which all Lourdes had been marvelling since the previous day. People ended by collecting there, a crowd gathered little by little, while she whispered in the ear of each "Look! that's she; the young party, you know, the young party who – "

But all at once she exclaimed: "I'll go and fetch Apolline from the shop;

I must show mademoiselle to Apolline."

Thereupon, however, Majeste, in a very dignified way, restrained her. "No," he said, "leave Apolline; she has three ladies to serve already. Mademoiselle and these gentlemen will certainly not leave Lourdes without making a few purchases. The little souvenirs that one carries away with one are so pleasant to look at later on! And our customers make a point of never buying elsewhere than here, in the shop which we have annexed to the hotel."

"I have already offered my services," added Madame Majeste, "and I renew them. Apolline will be so happy to show mademoiselle all our prettiest articles, at prices, too, which are incredibly low! Oh! there are some delightful things, delightful!"

Marie was becoming impatient at being detained in this manner, and Pierre was suffering from the increasing curiosity which they were arousing. As for M. de Guersaint, he enjoyed this popularity and triumph of his daughter immensely, and promised to return.

"Certainly," said he, "we will purchase a few little knick-knacks. Some souvenirs for ourselves, and some presents that we shall have to make, but later on, when we come back."

At last they escaped and descended the Avenue de la Grotte. The weather was again superb after the storms of the two preceding nights. Cooled by the rain, the morning air was delicious amidst the gaiety which the bright sun shed around. A busy crowd, well pleased with life, was already hurrying

along the pavements. And what pleasure it all was for Marie, to whom everything seemed new, charming, inappreciable! In the morning she had had to allow Raymonde to lend her a pair of boots, for she had taken good care not to put any in her portmanteau, superstitiously fearing that they might bring her bad luck. However, Raymonde's boots fitted her admirably, and she listened with childish delight to the little heels tapping merrily on the flagstones. And she did not remember having ever seen houses so white, trees so green, and passers-by so happy. All her senses seemed holiday-making, endowed with a marvellously delicate sensibility; she heard music, smelt distant perfumes, savoured the air greedily, as though it were some delicious fruit. But what she considered, above all, so nice, so charming, was to walk along in this wise on her father's arm. She had never done so before, although she had felt the desire for years, as for one of those impossible pleasures with which people occupy their minds when invalided. And now her dream was realised and her heart beat with joy. She pressed against her father, and strove to walk very upright and look very handsome, so as to do him honour. And he was quite proud, as happy as she was, showing, exhibiting her, overcome with joy at the thought that she belonged to him, that she was his blood, his flesh, his daughter, henceforth beaming with youth and health.

As they were all three crossing the Plateau de la Merlasse, already obstructed by a band of candle and bouquet sellers running after the pilgrims, M. de Guersaint exclaimed, "We are

surely not going to the Grotto empty-handed!"

Pierre, who was walking on the other side of Marie, himself brightened by her merry humour, thereupon stopped, and they were at once surrounded by a crowd of female hawkers, who with eager fingers thrust their goods into their faces. "My beautiful young lady! My good gentleman! Buy of me, of me, of me!" Such was the onslaught that it became necessary to struggle in order to extricate oneself. M. de Guersaint ended by purchasing the largest nosegay he could see – a bouquet of white marguerites, as round and hard as a cabbage – from a handsome, fair-haired, well developed girl of twenty, who was extremely bold both in look and manner. It only cost twenty sons, and he insisted on paying for it out of his own little purse, somewhat abashed meantime by the girl's unblushing effrontery. Then Pierre in his turn settled for the three candles which Marie had taken from an old woman, candles at two francs each, a very reasonable price, as she repeatedly said. And on being paid, the old creature, who had an angular face, covetous eyes, and a nose like the beak of a bird of prey, returned profuse and mellifluous thanks: "May Our Lady of Lourdes bless you, my beautiful young lady! May she cure you of your complaints, you and yours!" This enlivened them again, and they set out once more, all three laughing, amused like children at the idea that the good woman's wish had already been accomplished.

At the Grotto Marie wished to file off at once, in order to offer the bouquet and candles herself before even kneeling down.

There were not many people there as yet, and having gone to the end of the line their turn came after waiting some three or four minutes. And with what enraptured glances did she then examine everything – the altar of engraved silver, the harmonium-organ, the votive offerings, the candle-holders, streaming with wax blazing in broad daylight. She was now inside that Grotto which she had hitherto only seen from her box of misery; she breathed there as in Paradise itself, steeped rapturously in a pleasant warmth and odour, which slightly oppressed her. When she had placed the tapers at the bottom of the large basket, and had raised herself on tiptoe to fix the bouquet on one of the spears of the iron railing, she imprinted a long kiss upon the rock, below the statue of the Blessed Virgin, at the very spot, indeed, which millions of lips had already polished. And the stone received a kiss of love in which she put forth all the strength of her gratitude, a kiss with which her heart melted.

When she was once more outside, Marie prostrated and humbled herself in an almost endless act of thanksgiving. Her father also had knelt down near her, and mingled the fervour of his gratitude with hers. But he could not remain doing the same thing for long. Little by little he became uneasy, and ended by bending down to his daughter's ear to tell her that he had a call to make which he had previously forgotten. Assuredly the best course would be for her to remain where she was, praying, and waiting for him. While she completed her devotions he would hurry along and get his troublesome errand over; and then they

might walk about at ease wheresoever they liked. She did not understand him, did not even hear him, but simply nodded her head, promising that she would not move, and then such tender faith again took possession of her that her eyes, fixed on the white statue of the Virgin, filled with tears.

When M. de Guersaint had joined Pierre, who had remained a short distance off, he gave him the following explanation. "My dear fellow," he said, "it's a matter of conscience; I formally promised the coachman who drove us to Gavarnie that I would see his master and tell him the real cause of our delay. You know whom I mean – the hairdresser on the Place du Marcadal. And, besides, I want to get shaved."

Pierre, who felt uneasy at this proposal, had to give way in face of the promise that they would be back within a quarter of an hour. Only, as the distance seemed long, he on his side insisted on taking a trap which was standing at the bottom of the Plateau de la Merlasse. It was a sort of greenish cabriolet, and its driver, a fat fellow of about thirty, with the usual Basque cap on his head, was smoking a cigarette whilst waiting to be hired. Perched sideways on the seat with his knees wide apart, he drove them on with the tranquil indifference of a well-fed man who considers himself the master of the street.

"We will keep you," said Pierre as he alighted, when they had reached the Place du Marcadal.

"Very well, very well, Monsieur l'Abbe! I'll wait for you!" And then, leaving his lean horse in the hot sun, the driver went to

chat and laugh with a strong, dishevelled servant-girl who was washing a dog in the basin of the neighbouring fountain.

Cazaban, as it happened, was just then on the threshold of his shop, the lofty windows and pale green painting of which enlivened the dull Place, which was so deserted on week-days. When he was not pressed with work he delighted to parade in this manner, standing between his two windows, which pots of pomatum and bottles of perfumery decorated with bright shades of colour.

He at once recognised the gentlemen. "Very flattered, very much honoured.

Pray walk in, I beg of you," he said.

Then, at the first words which M. de Guersaint said to him to excuse the man who had driven him to Gavarnie, he showed himself well disposed. Of course it was not the man's fault; he could not prevent wheels coming to pieces, or storms falling. So long as the travellers did not complain all was well.

"Oh!" thereupon exclaimed M. de Guersaint, "it's a magnificent country, never to be forgotten."

"Well, monsieur, as our neighbourhood pleases you, you must come and see us again; we don't ask anything better," said Cazaban; and, on the architect seating himself in one of the arm-chairs and asking to be shaved, he began to bustle about.

His assistant was still absent, running errands for the pilgrims whom he lodged, a whole family, who were taking a case of chaplets, plaster Virgins, and framed engravings away with them.

You heard a confused tramping of feet and violent bursts of conversation coming from the first floor, all the helter-skelter of people whom the approaching departure and the packing of purchases lying hither and thither drove almost crazy. In the adjoining dining-room, the door of which had remained open, two children were draining the dregs of some cups of chocolate which stood about amidst the disorder of the breakfast service. The whole of the house had been let, entirely given over, and now had come the last hours of this invasion which compelled the hairdresser and his wife to seek refuge in the narrow cellar, where they slept on a small camp-bed.

While Cazaban was rubbing M. de Guersaint's cheeks with soap-suds, the architect questioned him. "Well, are you satisfied with the season?"

"Certainly, monsieur, I can't complain. As you hear, my travellers are leaving to-day, but I am expecting others to-morrow morning; barely sufficient time for a sweep out. It will be the same up to October."

Then, as Pierre remained standing, walking about the shop and looking at the walls with an air of impatience, he turned round politely and said: "Pray be seated, Monsieur l'Abbe; take a newspaper. It will not be long."

The priest having thanked him with a nod, and refusing to sit down, the hairdresser, whose tongue was ever itching to talk, continued: "Oh! as for myself, I am always busy, my house is renowned for the cleanliness of the beds and the excellence of

the fare. Only the town is not satisfied. Ah, no! I may even say that I have never known so much discontent here."

He became silent for a moment, and shaved his customer's left cheek; then again pausing in his work he suddenly declared with a cry, wrung from him by conviction, "The Fathers of the Grotto are playing with fire, monsieur, that is all I have to say."

From that moment, however, the vent-plug was withdrawn, and he talked and talked and talked again. His big eyes rolled in his long face with prominent cheek-bones and sunburnt complexion sprinkled with red, while the whole of his nervous little body continued on the jump, agitated by his growing exuberance of speech and gesture. He returned to his former indictment, and enumerated all the many grievances that the old town had against the Fathers. The hotel-keepers complained; the dealers in religious fancy articles did not take half the amount they ought to have realised; and, finally, the new town monopolised both the pilgrims and the cash; there was now no possibility for anyone but the keepers of the lodging-houses, hotels, and shops open in the neighbourhood of the Grotto to make any money whatever. It was a merciless struggle, a deadly hostility increasing from day to day, the old city losing a little of its life each season, and assuredly destined to disappear, – to be choked, assassinated, by the young town. Ah! their dirty Grotto! He would rather have his feet cut off than tread there. Wasn't it heart-rending, that knick-knack shop which they had stuck beside it? A shameful thing, at which a bishop had shown

himself so indignant that it was said he had written to the Pope! He, Cazaban, who flattered himself with being a freethinker and a Republican of the old days, who already under the Empire had voted for the Opposition candidates, assuredly had the right to declare that he did not believe in their dirty Grotto, and that he did not care a fig for it!

"Look here, monsieur," he continued; "I am going to tell you a fact. My brother belongs to the municipal council, and it's through him that I know it. I must tell you first of all that we now have a Republican municipal council, which is much worried by the demoralisation of the town. You can no longer go out at night without meeting girls in the streets – you know, those candle hawkers! They gad about with the drivers who come here when the season commences, and swell the suspicious floating population which comes no one knows whence. And I must also explain to you the position of the Fathers towards the town. When they purchased the land at the Grotto they signed an agreement by which they undertook not to engage in any business there. Well, they have opened a shop in spite of their signature. Is not that an unfair rivalry, unworthy of honest people? So the new council decided on sending them a deputation to insist on the agreement being respected, and enjoining them to close their shop at once. What do you think they answered, monsieur? Oh! what they have replied twenty times before, what they will always answer, when they are reminded of their engagements: 'Very well, we consent to keep them, but we are masters at our own

place, and we'll close the Grotto!'"

He raised himself up, his razor in the air, and, repeating his words, his eyes dilated by the enormity of the thing, he said, "'We'll close the Grotto.'"

Pierre, who was continuing his slow walk, suddenly stopped and said in his face, "Well! the municipal council had only to answer, 'Close it.'"

At this Cazaban almost choked; the blood rushed to his face, he was beside himself, and stammered out "Close the Grotto? – Close the Grotto?"

"Certainly! As the Grotto irritates you and rends your heart; as it's a cause of continual warfare, injustice, and corruption. Everything would be over, we should hear no more about it. That would really be a capital solution, and if the council had the power it would render you a service by forcing the Fathers to carry out their threat."

As Pierre went on speaking, Cazaban's anger subsided. He became very calm and somewhat pale, and in the depths of his big eyes the priest detected an expression of increasing uneasiness. Had he not gone too far in his passion against the Fathers? Many ecclesiastics did not like them; perhaps this young priest was simply at Lourdes for the purpose of stirring-up an agitation against them. Then who knows? – it might possibly result in the Grotto being closed later on. But it was by the Grotto that they all lived. If the old city screeched with rage at only picking up the crumbs, it was well pleased to secure even that

windfall; and the freethinkers themselves, who coined money with the pilgrims, like everyone else, held their tongues, ill at ease, and even frightened, when they found people too much of their opinion with regard to the objectionable features of new Lourdes. It was necessary to be prudent.

Cazaban thereupon returned to M. de Guersaint, whose other cheek he began shaving, murmuring the while in an off-hand manner: "Oh! what I say about the Grotto is not because it troubles me much in reality, and, besides, everyone must live."

In the dining-room, the children, amidst deafening shouts, had just broken one of the bowls, and Pierre, glancing through the open doorway, again noticed the engravings of religious subjects and the plaster Virgin with which the hairdresser had ornamented the apartment in order to please his lodgers. And just then, too, a voice shouted from the first floor that the trunk was ready, and that they would be much obliged if the assistant would cord it as soon as he returned.

However, Cazaban, in the presence of these two gentlemen whom, as a matter of fact, he did not know, remained suspicious and uneasy, his brain haunted by all sorts of disquieting suppositions. He was in despair at the idea of having to let them go away without learning anything about them, especially after having exposed himself. If he had only been able to withdraw the more rabid of his biting remarks about the Fathers. Accordingly, when M. de Guersaint rose to wash his chin, he yielded to a desire to renew the conversation.

"Have you heard talk of yesterday's miracle? The town is quite upside down with it; more than twenty people have already given me an account of what occurred. Yes, it seems they obtained an extraordinary miracle, a paralytic young lady got up and dragged her invalid carriage as far as the choir of the Basilica."

M. de Guersaint, who was about to sit down after wiping himself, gave a complacent laugh. "That young lady is my daughter," he said.

Thereupon, under this sudden and fortunate flash of enlightenment, Cazaban became all smiles. He felt reassured, and combed M. de Guersaint's hair with a masterly touch, amid a returning exuberance of speech and gesture. "Ah! monsieur, I congratulate you, I am flattered at having you in my hands. Since the young lady your daughter is cured, your father's heart is at ease. Am I not right?"

And he also found a few pleasant words for Pierre. Then, when he had decided to let them go, he looked at the priest with an air of conviction, and remarked, like a sensible man, desirous of coming to a conclusion on the subject of miracles: "There are some, Monsieur l'Abbe, which are good fortunes for everybody. From time to time we require one of that description."

Outside, M. de Guersaint had to go and fetch the coachman, who was still laughing with the servant-girl, while her dog, dripping with water, was shaking itself in the sun. In five minutes the trap brought them back to the bottom of the Plateau de la Merlasse. The trip had taken a good half-hour. Pierre wanted to

keep the conveyance, with the idea of showing Marie the town without giving her too much fatigue. So, while the father ran to the Grotto to fetch his daughter, he waited there beneath the trees.

The coachman at once engaged in conversation with the priest. He had lit another cigarette and showed himself very familiar. He came from a village in the environs of Toulouse, and did not complain, for he earned good round sums each day at Lourdes. You fed well there, said he, you amused yourself, it was what you might call a good neighbourhood. He said these things with the / abandon/ of a man who was not troubled with religious scruples, but yet did not forget the respect which he owed to an ecclesiastic.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.