

PIPING HOT!

(POT-BOUILLE)

A Realistic Novel

By Émile Zola.

Translated From The 63rd French Edition.
Illustrated With Sixteen Page Engravings
From Designs By Georges Bellenger
London: Vizetelly & Co.
1887.



ANGIE PINCHES LISA IN A FRIENDLY WAY.

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PREFACE.

One day, in the middle of a long literary conversation, Théodore Duret said to me: "I have known in my life two men of supreme intelligence. I knew of both before the world knew of either. Never did I doubt, nor was it possible to doubt, but that they would one day or other gain the highest distinctions—those men were Léon Gambetta and Émile Zola."

Of Zola I am able to speak, and I can thoroughly realise how interesting it must have been to have watched him, at that time, when he was poor and unknown, obtaining acceptance of his articles with difficulty, and surrounded by the feeble and trivial in spirit, who, out of inborn ignorance and acquired idiocy, look with ridicule on those who believe that there is still a new word to say, still a new cry to cry.

I did not know Émile Zola in those days, but he must have been then as he is now, and I should find it difficult to understand how any man of average discrimination could speak with him for half-an-hour without recognising that he was one of those mighty monumental intelligences, the statues of a century, that remain and are gazed upon through the long pages of the world's history. This, at least, is the impression Émile Zola has always produced upon me. I have seen him in company, and company of no mean order, and when pitted against his compeers, the contrast has only made him appear grander, greater, nobler. The witty, the clever Alphonse Daudet, ever as ready for a supper party as a literary discussion, with all his splendid gifts, can do no more when Zola speaks than shelter himself behind an epigram; Edmond De Goncourt,

aristocratic, dignified, seated amid his Japanese watercolours, bronzes, and Louis XV. furniture, bitterly admits, if not that there is a greater naturalistic god than he, at least that there is a colossus whose strength he is unable to oppose.

This is the position Émile Zola takes amid his contemporaries.

By some strange power of assimilation, he appropriates and makes his own of all things; ideas that before were spattered, dislocated, are suddenly united, fitted into their places. In speaking, as in writing, he always appears greater than his subject, and, Titan-like, grasps it as a whole; in speaking, as in writing, the strength and beauty of his style is an unfailing use of the right word; each phrase is a solid piece of masonry, and as he talks an edifice of thought rises architecturally perfect and complete in design.

And it is of this side of Émile Zola's genius that I wish particularly to speak—a side that has never been taken sufficiently into consideration, but which, nevertheless, is its ever-guiding and determinating quality. Émile Zola is to me a great epic poet, and he may be, I think, not inappropriately termed the Homer of modern life. For he, more than any other writer, it seems, possesses the power of seeing a subject as a whole, can divest it at will of all side issues, can seize with a firm, logical comprehension on the main lines of its construction, and that without losing sight of the remotest causes or the furthest consequences of its existence. It is here that his strength lies, and his is the strength which has conquered the world. Of his realism a great deal, of course, has been said, but only because it is the most obvious, not the most dominant quality of his work. The mistletoe invariably hides the oak from the eyes of the vulgar.

That Émile Zola has done well to characterise his creations with the vivid sentiment of modern life rather than the pale dream which reveals to us the past, that he was able to bend, to model, to make serviceable to his purpose the ephemeral habits and customs of our day, few will now deny. But this was only the off-shoot of his genius. That the colour of the nineteenth century with which he clothes the bodies of his heroes and heroines is not always exact, that none other has attempted to spin these garments before, I do not dispute. They will grow threadbare and fall to dust, even as the hide of the megatharium, of which only the colossal bones now remain to us wherewith to construct the fabric of the primeval world. And, in like manner, when the dream of the socialist is realized, when the burden of pleasure and work is proportioned out equally to all, and men live on a more strictly regulated plan than do either the ant or the bee, I believe that the gigantic skeleton of the Rougon-Macquart family will still continue to resist the ravages of time, and that western scientists will refer to it when disputing about the idiosyncrasies of a past civilization.

In the preceding paragraph, I have said neither more nor less than my meaning, for I am convinced that the living history of no age has been as well written as the last half of the nineteenth century is in the Rougon-Macquart series. I pass over the question whether, in describing Renée's dress, a mistake was made in the price of lace, also whether the author was wrong in permitting himself the anachronism of describing a fête in the opera-house a couple of years before the building was completed. Errors of this kind do not appear to me to be worth considering. What I maintain is, that what Émile Zola has done, and what he alone has done—and I do not make an exception even in the case of the mighty Balzac—is to have conceived and constructed the frame-work of a complex

civilization like ours, in all its worse ramifications. Never, it seems to me, was the existence of the epic faculty more amply demonstrated than by the genealogical tree of this now celebrated family.

The grandeur, the amplitude of this scheme will be seen at once. Adélaïde Fouque, a mad woman confined in a lunatic asylum at Plassans, is the first ancestor; she is the transmitter of the original neurosis, which, regulated by his or her physical constitution, assumes various forms in each individual member of the family, and is developed according to the surroundings in which he or she lives. By Rougon this woman had two children; by Macquart, with whom she cohabited on the death of her husband, she had three. Ursule Macquart married a man named Mouret, and their children are therefore cousins of the Rougon-Macquarts. This family has some forty or fifty members, who are distributed through the different grades of our social system. Some have attained the highest positions, as, Son Excellence Eugène Rougon, others have sunk to the lowest depths, as Gervaise in "L'Assommoir," but all are tainted with the hereditary malady. By it Nana is invincibly driven to prostitution; by it Etienne Lantier, in "Germinal," will be driven to crime; by it his brother, Claude, will be made a great painter. Protean-like is this disease. Sometimes it skips over a generation, sometimes lies almost latent, and the balance of the intelligence is but slightly disturbed, as in the instance of Octave in "Pot-Bouille," and Lazare in "La Joie de Vivre." But the mind of the latter is more distorted than is Octave's. Lazare lives in a perpetual fear of death, and is prevented from realizing any of his magnificent projects by his vacillating temperament; in him we have an example how a splendid intelligence may be drained away like water through an imperceptible crack in the vase, and how

what might have been the fruit of a life withers like the flowers from which the nourishing liquid has been withdrawn.

And so in the Rougon-Macquart series we have instances of all kinds of psychical development and decay; and with an overt and an intuitive reading of character truly wonderful, Émile Zola makes us feel that as the north and south poles and torrid zones are hemmed about with a girdle of air, so an ever varying but ever recognisable kinship unites, sometimes, indeed, by an almost imperceptible thread, the ends the most opposed of this remarkable race, and is diffused through the different variation each individual member successively presents. Can we not trace a mysterious physical resemblance between Octave Mouret in “Le Bonheur des Dames” and Maxime in “La Curée?” Is not the moral something by which Claude Lantier in “Le Ventre de Paris” escapes the fate of Lazare made apparent? Then, again, does not the inherited neurosis that makes of Octave a millionaire, of Lazare a wretched hypochondriac, of Claude Lantier a genius, of Maxime a symbol of ephemeral vice, reappear in a new and more deadly form in Jeanne, the hysterical child, in that most beautiful of beautiful books, “Une Page d’Amour?”

As beasts at a fair are urged on by the goads of their drivers, so certain fate pushes this wretched family forward into irrevocable death that is awaiting it. At each generation they grow more nervous, more worn out, more ready to succumb beneath the ravages of the horrible disease that in a hundred different ways is sweeping them into the night of the grave.

Even from this imperfect outline, what majesty, what grandeur there is in this dark design! Does not the great idea of fate receive a new and more terrible signification? Is not the horror and gloom of

the tragedy increased by the fact that the thought was born in the study of the scientist, and not in the cloud-palace of the dreamer? What poet ever conceived an idea more vast! and if further proof of the epic faculty with which I have credited Émile Zola be wanting, I have only to refer to Pascal Rougon. Noah survived the deluge. Pascal Rougon, by some miracle, escapes the inherited stain—he, and he alone, is completely free from it. He is a doctor, an advanced scientist, and he, in the twentieth volume, will analyse the terrible neurosis that has devastated his family.

In the upbuilding of this enormous edifice, Émile Zola shows the same constructive talent as he did in its conception. The energy he displays is marvellous. Every year a wing, courtyard, cupola, or tower is added, and each is as varied as the most imaginative could desire. Without looking further back than “L’Assommoir,” let us consider what has been done. In this work, we have a study of the life of the working people in Paris, written, for the sake of preserving the “milieu,” for the most part in their own language. It shows how the workers of our great social machine live, and must live, in ignorance and misery; it shows, as never was shown before, what the accident of birth means; it shows in a new way, and, to my mind, in as grand a way as did the laments of the chorus in the Greek play, the irrevocability of fate. “L’Assommoir” was followed by “Une Page d’Amour,” a beautiful Parisian idyl. Here we see the “bourgeois” at their best. We have seven descriptions of Paris seen from a distance of which Turner might be proud; we have a picture of a children’s costume ball which Meissonier might fall down and worship; we have the portrait of a beautiful and virtuous woman with her love story told, as it were, over the dying head of Jeanne (her little girl), the child whose nervous sensibilities are so delicate that she trembles with jealousy when

she suspects that behind her back her mother is looking at the doctor. After "Une Page d'Amour" comes "Nana," and with her we are transported to a world of pleasure-seekers; vicious men and women who have no thought but the killing of time and the gratification of their lusts. Nana is the Messaline of modern days, and, obeying the epic tendency of his genius, Émile Zola has instituted a comparison between the death of the "gilded fly," conceived in drunkenness and debauchery, and the harlot city of the third Emperor, which, rotten with vice, falls before the victorious arms of the Germans.

"Nana" and "Une Page d'Amour" are psychological and philological studies of two radically different types of women; in both works, and likewise in "L'Assommoir," there is much descriptive writing, and, doubtless, Émile Zola had this fact present in his mind when he set himself to write "Pot-Bouille," that terrible satire on the "bourgeoisie." He must have said, as his plan formulated itself in his mind, "this is a novel dealing with the home-life of the middle-classes; if I wish to avoid repeating myself, this book must contain a vast number of characters, and the descriptions must be reduced to a bare sufficiency, no more than will allow my readers to form an exact impression of the surroundings through which, the action passes."

"Pot-Bouille," or "Piping Hot!" as the present translation is called, is, therefore, an inquiry into the private lives of a number of individuals, who, while they follow different occupations, belong to the same class and live under the same roof. The house in the Rue de Choiseul is one of those immense "maisons bourgeoises," in which, apparently, an infinite number of people live. On the first floor, we find Monsieur Duveyrier, an "avocat de la cour," with his musical wife, Clotilde, and her father, Monsieur Vabre, a retired

notary and proprietor of the house, who is absorbed in the preparation of an important statistical work; on the fourth floor are Madame Josserand, her two daughters, whom she is always trying to marry, her crazy son Saturnin, and her husband who spends his nights addressing advertising circulars at three francs a thousand, in order to eke out an additional something to help his family to ape an appearance of easy circumstances. On the third floor is an architect, Monsieur Campardon, with his ailing, yet blooming, wife Rose, and her cousin, "l'autre Madame Campardon." There is also one of Monsieur Vabre's sons, and "a distinguished gentleman who comes one night a week to work."

These are the principal "locataires" but, in various odd corners, "des petits appartements qui donnent sur la cour," we find all sorts and conditions of people. First on the list is the government clerk Jules and his wife Marie. She is a weak-minded little thing who commits adultery without affection, without desire, and the frequency of her confinements excites the ire of her mother and father. Then come two young men, Octave and Trublot. The former plays a part similar to that of a tenor in an opera; he is the accepted lover of the ladies. The latter is equally beloved by the maids. From the frequency of his visits, he may almost be said to live in the house; he is constantly asked to dine by one or other of the inmates, and in the morning he is generally found hiding behind the door of one of the servants' rooms, waiting for an opportunity of descending the staircase unperceived by the terrible "concierge," the moral guardian of the house.

Other visitors who figure prominently in the story are Madame Josserand's brother, Uncle Bachelard, a dissipated widower, and his nephew Gueulin; the Abbé Mouret, ever ready to throw the mantle of religion over the back-slidings of his flock, and Madame

Hédouin, the frigid directress of “The Ladies’ Paradise,” where Octave is originally engaged. The remaining “locataires” are Madame Juzeur, a lady who only reads poetry, and who was deserted by her husband after a single week of matrimonial bliss; a workwoman who has a garret under the slates; and last, but not least, an author who lives on the second floor. He is rarely ever seen, he makes no one’s acquaintance, and thereby excites the enmity of everyone.

All these, the author of course excepted, pass and repass before the reader, and each is at once individual and representative; even the maid-servants—who only answer “yes” and “no” to their masters and mistresses—are adroitly characterised. We see them in their kitchens engaged in their daily occupations: while peeling onions and gutting rabbits and fish they call to and abuse each other from window to window. There is Julie, the belle of the attics, of whose perfume and pomatum Trublot makes liberal use when he honours her with a visit; there is fat Adèle whose dirty habits and slovenly ways make of her a butt whereat is levelled the ridicule and scorn of her fellow-servants; there are the lovers, Hippolyte and Clémence, whose carnal intercourse affords to Madame Duveyrier much ground for uneasiness, and in the end necessitates the intervention of the Abbé. Never were the manners and morals of servants so thoroughly sifted before, never was the relationship which their lives bear to those of their masters and mistresses so cunningly contrasted. The courtyard of the house echoes with their quarrelling voices, and it is there, in a scene of which Swift might be proud, that is spoken the last and terrible word of scorn which Émile Zola flings against the “bourgeoisie.” From her kitchen window a fellow-servant of Julie’s is congratulating her on being about to leave, and wishing that she may find a better place. To

which Julie replies, “*Toutes les baraques se ressemblent. Au jour d’aujourd’hui, qui a fait l’une a fait l’autre. C’est cochon et compagnie.*”

I do not know to what other work to go to find so much successful sketching of character. I had better, I think, explain the meaning I attach to this phrase, “sketching of character,” for it is too common an error to associate the idea of superficiality with the word “sketch.” The true artist never allows anything to leave his studio that he deems superficial, or even unfinished. The word unfinished is not found in his vocabulary; to him a sketch is as complete as a finished picture. In the former he has painted broadly and freely, wishing to render the vividness, the vitality of a first impression; in the latter he is anxious to render the subtlety of a more intellectual and consequently a less sensual emotion. The portrait of Madame Josserand is a case in point, it is certainly less minute than that of H el ene Mouret, but is not for that less finished. In both, the artist has achieved, and perfectly, the task he set himself. “Piping Hot!” cannot be better defined than as a portrait album in which many of our French neighbours may be readily recognized.

This merit will not fail to strike any intelligent reader; but the marvellous way the almost insurmountable difficulties of binding together the stories of the lives of the different inhabitants of the house in the Rue de Choiseul are overcome, none but a fellow-worker will be able to appreciate at their full value. Up and down the famous staircase we go, from one household to another, interested equally in each, disgusted equally with all. And this sentence leads us right up to the enemies’ guns, brings us face to face with the two batteries from which the critics have directed their fire. The first is the truthfulness of the picture, the second is

the coarseness with which it is painted. I will attempt to reply to both.

M. Albert Wolff in the "Figaro" declared that in a "maison bourgeoise" so far were "locataires" from being all on visiting terms, that it was of constant occurrence that the people on one floor not only did not know by sight but were ignorant of the names of those living above and below them; that the spectacle of a "maison bourgeoise," with the lodgers running up and down stairs in and out of each other's apartments at all hours of the night and day, was absolutely false; had never existed in Paris, and was an invention of the writer. Without a word of parley I admit the truth of this indictment. I will admit that no house could be found in Paris where from basement to attic the inhabitants are on such terms of intimacy as they are in the house in the Rue de Choiseul; but at the same time I deny that the extreme isolation described by M. Wolff could be found or is even possible in any house inhabited over a term of years by the same people. Émile Zola has then done no more than to exaggerate, to draw the strings that attach the different parts a little tighter than they would be in nature. Art, let there be no mistake on this point, be it romantic or naturalistic, is a perpetual concession; and the character of the artist is determined by the selection he makes amid the mass of conflicting issues that, all clamouring equally to be chosen, present themselves to his mind. In the case of Émile Zola, the epic faculty which has been already mentioned as the dominant trait of his genius naturally impelled him to make too perfect a whole of the heterogeneous mass of material that he had determined to construct from. The flaw is more obvious than in his other works, but in "Piping Hot!" he has only done what he has done since he first put pen to paper, what he will continue to do till he ceases to write. We will admit

that to make all the people living in the house in the Rue de Choiseul on visiting terms was a trick of composition—*et puis?*

This was the point from which the critics who pretended to be guided by artistic considerations attacked the book; the others entrenched themselves behind the good old earthworks of morality, and primed their rusty popguns. Now there was a time, and a very good time it must have been, when a book was judged on its literary merits; but of late years a new school of criticism has come into fashion. Its manners are very summary indeed. “Would you or would you not give that book to your sister of sixteen to read?” If you hesitate you are lost; for then the question is dismissed with a smile and you are voted out of court. It would be vain to suggest that there are other people in the world besides your sister of sixteen summers.

I do not intend putting forward any well known paradox, that art is morals, and morals are art. That there are great and eternal moral laws which must be acted up to in art as in life I am more than ready to admit; but these are very different from the wretched conventionalities which have been arbitrarily imposed upon us in England. To begin with, it must be clear to the meanest intelligence that it would never do to judge the dead by the same standard as the living. If that were done, all the dramatists of the sixteenth century would have to go; those of the Restoration would follow. To burn Swift somebody lower in the social scale than Mr. Binns would have to be found, although he might do to commit Sterne to the flames. Byron, Shelley, yes, even Landor would have to go the same way. What would happen then, it is hard to say; but it is not unfair to hint that if the burning were argued to its logical conclusion, some of the extra good people would find it difficult to show reason, if the intention of the author were not taken into

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