

The Fat and the Thin

by

Emile Zola

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INTRODUCTION

"THE FAT AND THE THIN," or, to use the French title, "Le Ventre de Paris," is a story of life in and around those vast Central Markets which form a distinctive feature of modern Paris. Even the reader who has never crossed the Channel must have heard of the Parisian *Halles*, for much has been written about them, not only in English books on the French metropolis, but also in English newspapers, magazines, and reviews; so that few, I fancy, will commence the perusal of the present volume without having, at all events, some knowledge of its subject matter.

The Paris markets form such a world of their own, and teem at certain hours of the day and night with such exuberance of life, that it was only natural they should attract the attention of a novelist like M. Zola, who, to use his own words, delights "in any subject in which vast masses of people can be shown in motion." Mr. Sherard tells us[*] that the idea of "Le Ventre de Paris" first occurred to M. Zola in 1872, when he used continually to take his friend Paul Alexis for a ramble through the Halles. I have in my possession, however, an article written by M. Zola some five or six years before that time, and in this one can already detect the germ of the present work; just as the motif of another of M. Zola's novels, "La Joie de Vivre," can be traced to a short story written for a Russian review.

[*] *Emile Zola: a Biographical and Critical Study*, by Robert Harborough Sherard, pp. 103, 104. London, Chatto & Windus, 1893.

Similar instances are frequently to be found in the writings of English as well as French novelists, and are, of course, easily explained. A young man unknown to fame, and unable to procure the publication of a long novel, often contents himself with embodying some particular idea in a short sketch or story, which finds its way into one or another periodical, where it lies buried and forgotten by everybody—excepting its author. Time goes by, however, the writer achieves some measure of success, and one day it occurs to him to elaborate and perfect that old idea of his, only a faint *aperçu* of which, for lack of opportunity, he had been able to give in the past. With a little research, no doubt, an interesting essay might be written on these literary resuscitations; but if one except certain novelists who are so deficient in ideas that they continue writing and rewriting the same story throughout their lives, it will, I think, be generally found that the revivals in question are due to some such reason as that given above.

It should be mentioned that the article of M. Zola's young days to which I have referred is not one on market life in particular, but one on violets. It contains, however, a vigorous, if brief, picture of the Halles in the small hours of the morning, and is instinct

with that realistic descriptive power of which M. Zola has since given so many proofs. We hear the rumbling and clattering of the market carts, we see the piles of red meat, the baskets of silvery fish, the mountains of vegetables, green and white; in a few paragraphs the whole market world passes in kaleidoscopic fashion before our eyes by the pale, dancing light of the gas lamps and the lanterns. Several years after the paper I speak of was published, when M. Zola began to issue "Le Ventre de Paris," M. Tournachon, better known as Nadar, the aeronaut and photographer, rushed into print to proclaim that the realistic novelist had simply pilfered his ideas from an account of the Halles which he (Tournachon) had but lately written. M. Zola, as is so often his wont, scorned to reply to this charge of plagiarism; but, had he chosen, he could have promptly settled the matter by producing his own forgotten article.

At the risk of passing for a literary ghoul, I propose to exhume some portion of the paper in question, as, so far as translation can avail, it will show how M. Zola wrote and what he thought in 1867. After the description of the markets to which I have alluded, there comes the following passage:—

I was gazing at the preparations for the great daily orgy of Paris when I espied a throng of people bustling suspiciously in a corner. A few lanterns threw a yellow light upon this crowd. Children, women, and men with outstretched hands were fumbling in dark piles which extended along the footway. I thought that those piles must be remnants of meat sold for a trifling price, and that all those wretched people were rushing upon them to feed. I drew near, and discovered my mistake. The heaps were not heaps of meat, but heaps of violets. All the flowery poesy of the streets of Paris lay there, on that muddy pavement, amidst mountains of food. The gardeners of the suburbs had brought their sweet-scented harvests to the markets and were disposing of them to the hawkers. From the rough fingers of their peasant growers the violets were passing to the dirty hands of those who would cry them in the streets. At winter time it is between four and six o'clock in the morning that the flowers of Paris are thus sold at the Halles. Whilst the city sleeps and its butchers are getting all ready for its daily attack of indigestion, a trade in poetry is plied in dark, dank corners. When the sun rises the bright red meat will be displayed in trim, carefully dressed joints, and the violets, mounted on bits of osier, will gleam softly within their elegant collars of green leaves. But when they arrive, in the dark night, the bullocks, already ripped open, discharge black blood, and the trodden flowers lie prone upon the footways. . . . I noticed just in front of me one large bunch which had slipped off a neighbouring mound and was almost bathing in the gutter. I picked it up. Underneath, it was soiled with mud; the greasy, fetid sewer water had left black stains upon the flowers. And then, gazing at these exquisite daughters of our gardens and our woods, astray amidst all the filth of the city, I began to ponder. On what woman's bosom would those wretched flowerets open and bloom? Some hawker would dip them in a pail of water, and of all the bitter odours of the Paris mud they would retain

but a slight pungency, which would remain mingled with their own sweet perfume. The water would remove their stains, they would pale somewhat, and become a joy both for the smell and for the sight. Nevertheless, in the depths of each corolla there would still remain some particle of mud suggestive of impurity. And I asked myself how much love and passion was represented by all those heaps of flowers shivering in the bleak wind. To how many loving ones, and how many indifferent ones, and how many egotistical ones, would all those thousands and thousands of violets go! In a few hours' time they would be scattered to the four corners of Paris, and for a paltry copper the passers-by would purchase a glimpse and a whiff of springtide in the muddy streets.

Imperfect as the rendering may be, I think that the above passage will show that M. Zola was already possessed of a large amount of his acknowledged realistic power at the early date I have mentioned. I should also have liked to quote a rather amusing story of a priggish Philistine who ate violets with oil and vinegar, strongly peppered, but considerations of space forbid; so I will pass to another passage, which is of more interest and importance. Both French and English critics have often contended that although M. Zola is a married man, he knows very little of women, as there has virtually never been any *feminine romance* in his life. There are those who are aware of the contrary, but whose tongues are stayed by considerations of delicacy and respect. Still, as the passage I am now about to reproduce is signed and acknowledged as fact by M. Zola himself, I see no harm in slightly raising the veil from a long-past episode in the master's life:—

The light was rising, and as I stood there before that footway transformed into a bed of flowers my strange night-fancies gave place to recollections at once sweet and sad. I thought of my last excursion to Fontenay-aux-Roses, with the loved one, the good fairy of my twentieth year. Springtime was budding into birth, the tender foliage gleamed in the pale April sunshine. The little pathway skirting the hill was bordered by large fields of violets. As one passed along, a strong perfume seemed to penetrate one and make one languid. *She* was leaning on my arm, faint with love from the sweet odour of the flowers. A whiteness hovered over the country-side, little insects buzzed in the sunshine, deep silence fell from the heavens, and so low was the sound of our kisses that not a bird in all the hedges showed sign of fear. At a turn of the path we perceived some old bent women, who with dry, withered hands were hurriedly gathering violets and throwing them into large baskets. She who was with me glanced longingly at the flowers, and I called one of the women. "You want some violets?" said she. "How much? A pound?"

God of Heaven! She sold her flowers by the pound! We fled in deep distress. It seemed as though the country-side had been transformed into a huge grocer's shop. . . . Then we ascended to the woods of Verrieres, and there, in the grass, under the soft, fresh foliage, we found some tiny violets which seemed to be dreadfully afraid, and contrived to hide themselves with all sorts of artful ruses. During two long hours I scoured the

grass and peered into every nook, and as soon as ever I found a fresh violet I carried it to her. She bought it of me, and the price that I exacted was a kiss. . . . And I thought of all those things, of all that happiness, amidst the hubbub of the markets of Paris, before those poor dead flowers whose graveyard the footway had become. I remembered my good fairy, who is now dead and gone, and the little bouquet of dry violets which I still preserve in a drawer. When I returned home I counted their withered stems: there were twenty of them, and over my lips there passed the gentle warmth of my loved one's twenty kisses.

And now from violets I must, with a brutality akin to that which M. Zola himself displays in some of his transitions, pass to very different things, for some time back a well-known English poet and essayist wrote of the present work that it was redolent of pork, onions, and cheese. To one of his sensitive temperament, with a muse strictly nourished on sugar and water, such gross edibles as pork and cheese and onions were peculiarly offensive. That humble plant the onion, employed to flavour wellnigh every savoury dish, can assuredly need no defence; in most European countries, too, cheese has long been known as the poor man's friend; whilst as for pork, apart from all other considerations, I can claim for it a distinct place in English literature. A greater essayist by far than the critic to whom I am referring, a certain Mr. Charles Lamb, of the India House, has left us an immortal page on the origin of roast pig and crackling. And, when everything is considered, I should much like to know why novels should be confined to the aspirations of the soul, and why they should not also treat of the requirements of our physical nature? From the days of antiquity we have all known what befell the members when, guided by the brain, they were foolish enough to revolt against the stomach. The latter plays a considerable part not only in each individual organism, but also in the life of the world. Over and over again—I could adduce a score of historical examples—it has thwarted the mightiest designs of the human mind. We mortals are much addicted to talking of our minds and our souls and treating our bodies as mere dross. But I hold—it is a personal opinion—that in the vast majority of cases the former are largely governed by the last. I conceive, therefore, that a novel which takes our daily sustenance as one of its themes has the best of all *raisons d'etre*. A foreign writer of far more consequence and ability than myself—Signor Edmondo de Amicis—has proclaimed the present book to be "one of the most original and happiest inventions of French genius," and I am strongly inclined to share his opinion.

It should be observed that the work does not merely treat of the provisioning of a great city. That provisioning is its *scenario*; but it also embraces a powerful allegory, the prose song of "the eternal battle between the lean of this world and the fat—a battle in which, as the author shows, the latter always come off successful. It is, too, in its way an allegory of the triumph of the fat bourgeois, who lives well and beds softly, over the gaunt and Ishmael artist—an allegory which M. Zola has more than once introduced into his pages, another notable instance thereof being found in 'Germinal,' with the fat, well-fed Gregoires on the one hand, and the starving Maheus on the other."

From this quotation from Mr. Sherard's pages it will be gathered that M. Zola had a distinct social aim in writing this book. Wellnigh the whole social question may, indeed, be summed up in the words "food and comfort"; and in a series of novels like "Les Rougon-Macquart," dealing firstly with different conditions and grades of society, and, secondly, with the influence which the Second Empire exercised on France, the present volume necessarily had its place marked out from the very first.

Mr. Sherard has told us of all the labour which M. Zola expended on the preparation of the work, of his multitudinous visits to the Paris markets, his patient investigation of their organism, and his keen artistic interest in their manifold phases of life. And bred as I was in Paris, a partaker as I have been of her exultations and her woes they have always had for me a strong attraction. My memory goes back to the earlier years of their existence, and I can well remember many of the old surroundings which have now disappeared. I can recollect the last vestiges of the antique *piliers*, built by Francis I, facing the Rue de la Tonnellerie. Paul Niquet's, with its "bowel-twisting brandy" and its crew of drunken ragpickers, was certainly before my time; but I can readily recall Baratte's and Bordier's and all the folly and prodigality which raged there; I knew, too, several of the noted thieves' haunts which took the place of Niquet's, and which one was careful never to enter without due precaution. And then, when the German armies were beleaguering Paris, and two millions of people were shut off from the world, I often strolled to the Halles to view their strangely altered aspect. The fish pavilion, of which M. Zola has so much to say, was bare and deserted. The railway drays, laden with the comestible treasures of the ocean, no longer thundered through the covered ways. At the most one found an auction going on in one or another corner, and a few Seine eels or gudgeons fetching wellnigh their weight in gold. Then, in the butter and cheese pavilions, one could only procure some nauseous melted fat, while in the meat department horse and mule and donkey took the place of beef and veal and mutton. Mule and donkey were very scarce, and commanded high prices, but both were of better flavour than horse; mule, indeed, being quite a delicacy. I also well remember a stall at which dog was sold, and, hunger knowing no law, I once purchased, cooked, and ate a couple of canine cutlets which cost me two francs apiece. The flesh was pinky and very tender, yet I would not willingly make such a repast again. However, peace and plenty at last came round once more, the Halles regained their old-time aspect, and in the years which followed I more than once saw the dawn rise slowly over the mounds of cabbages, carrots, leeks, and pumpkins, even as M. Zola describes in the following pages. He has, I think, depicted with remarkable accuracy and artistic skill the many varying effects of colour that are produced as the climbing sun casts its early beams on the giant larder and its masses of food—effects of colour which, to quote a famous saying of the first Napoleon, show that "the markets of Paris are the Louvre of the people" in more senses than one.

The reader will bear in mind that the period dealt with by the author in this work is that of 1857-60, when the new Halles Centrales were yet young, and indeed not altogether complete. Still, although many old landmarks have long since been swept away, the picture of life in all essential

particulars remained the same. Prior to 1860 the limits of Paris were the so-called *boulevards extérieurs*, from which a girdle of suburbs, such as Montmartre, Belleville, Passy, and Montrouge, extended to the fortifications; and the population of the city was then only 1,400,000 souls. Some of the figures which will be found scattered through M. Zola's work must therefore be taken as applying entirely to the past.

Nowadays the amount of business transacted at the Halles has very largely increased, in spite of the multiplication of district markets. Paris seems to have an insatiable appetite, though, on the other hand, its cuisine is fast becoming all simplicity. To my thinking, few more remarkable changes have come over the Parisians of recent years than this change of diet. One by one great restaurants, formerly renowned for particular dishes and special wines, have been compelled through lack of custom to close their doors; and this has not been caused so much by inability to defray the cost of high feeding as by inability to indulge in it with impunity in a physical sense. In fact, Paris has become a city of impaired digestions, which nowadays seek the simplicity without the heaviness of the old English cuisine; and, should things continue in their present course, I fancy that Parisians anxious for high feeding will ultimately have to cross over to our side of the Channel.

These remarks, I trust, will not be considered out of place in an introduction to a work which to no small extent treats of the appetite of Paris. The reader will find that the characters portrayed by M. Zola are all types of humble life, but I fail to see that their circumstances should render them any the less interesting. A faithful portrait of a shopkeeper, a workman, or a workgirl is artistically of far more value than all the imaginary sketches of impossible dukes and good and wicked baronets in which so many English novels abound. Several of M. Zola's personages seem to me extremely lifelike—Gavard, indeed, is a *chef-d'oeuvre* of portraiture: I have known many men like him; and no one who lived in Paris under the Empire can deny the accuracy with which the author has delineated his hero Florent, the dreamy and hapless revolutionary caught in the toils of others. In those days, too, there was many such a plot as M. Zola describes, instigated by agents like Logre and Lebigre, and allowed to mature till the eve of an election or some other important event which rendered its exposure desirable for the purpose of influencing public opinion. In fact, in all that relates to the so-called "conspiracy of the markets," M. Zola, whilst changing time and place to suit the requirements of his story, has simply followed historical lines. As for the Quenus, who play such prominent parts in the narrative, the husband is a weakling with no soul above his stewpans, whilst his wife, the beautiful Lisa, in reality wears the breeches and rules the roast. The manner in which she cures Quenu of his political proclivities, though savouring of persuasiveness rather than violence, is worthy of the immortal Mrs. Caudle: Douglas Jerrold might have signed a certain lecture which she administers to her astounded helpmate. Of Pauline, the Quenus' daughter, we see but little in the story, but she becomes the heroine of another of M. Zola's novels, "La Joie de Vivre," and instead of inheriting the egotism of her parents, develops a passionate love and devotion for others. In a like way Claude Lantier, Florent's artist friend and son of Gervaise of the "Assommoir," figures more particularly in

"L'Oeuvre," which tells how his painful struggle for fame resulted in madness and suicide. With reference to the beautiful Norman and the other fishwives and gossips scattered through the present volume, and those genuine types of Parisian *gaminerie*, Muche, Marjolin, and Cadine, I may mention that I have frequently chastened their language in deference to English susceptibilities, so that the story, whilst retaining every essential feature, contains nothing to which exception can reasonably be taken.

E. A. V.

CHAPTER I

Amidst the deep silence and solitude prevailing in the avenue several market gardeners' carts were climbing the slope which led towards Paris, and the fronts of the houses, asleep behind the dim lines of elms on either side of the road, echoed back the rhythmical jolting of the wheels. At the Neuilly bridge a cart full of cabbages and another full of peas had joined the eight waggons of carrots and turnips coming down from Nanterre; and the horses, left to themselves, had continued plodding along with lowered heads, at a regular though lazy pace, which the ascent of the slope now slackened. The sleeping waggoners, wrapped in woollen cloaks, striped black and grey, and grasping the reins slackly in their closed hands, were stretched at full length on their stomachs atop of the piles of vegetables. Every now and then, a gas lamp, following some patch of gloom, would light up the hobnails of a boot, the blue sleeve of a blouse, or the peak of a cap peering out of the huge florescence of vegetables—red bouquets of carrots, white bouquets of turnips, and the overflowing greenery of peas and cabbages.

And all along the road, and along the neighbouring roads, in front and behind, the distant rumbling of vehicles told of the presence of similar contingents of the great caravan which was travelling onward through the gloom and deep slumber of that matutinal hour, lulling the dark city to continued repose with its echoes of passing food.

Madame Francois's horse, Balthazar, an animal that was far too fat, led the van. He was plodding on, half asleep and wagging his ears, when suddenly, on reaching the Rue de Longchamp, he quivered with fear and came to a dead stop. The horses behind, thus unexpectedly checked, ran their heads against the backs of the carts in front of them, and the procession halted amidst a clattering of bolts and chains and the oaths of the awakened waggoners. Madame Francois, who sat in front of her vehicle, with her back to a board which kept her vegetables in position, looked down; but, in the dim light thrown to the left by a small square lantern, which illuminated little beyond one of Balthazar's sheeny flanks, she could distinguish nothing.

"Come, old woman, let's get on!" cried one of the men, who had raised himself to a kneeling position amongst his turnips; "it's only some drunken sot."

Madame Francois, however, had bent forward and on her right hand had caught sight of a black mass, lying almost under the horse's hoofs, and blocking the road.

"You wouldn't have us drive over a man, would you?" said she, jumping to the ground.

It was indeed a man lying at full length upon the road, with his arms stretched out and his face in the dust. He seemed to be remarkably tall, but as withered as a dry branch,

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