

A Beleaguered City

THE AUTHOR inscribes this little Book, with tender and grateful greetings, to those whose sympathy has supported her through many and long years, the kind audience of her UNKNOWN FRIENDS.

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THE NARRATIVE OF M. LE MAIRE: THE CONDITION OF THE CITY.

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

circumstances necessary, to explain the following narrative; to which I will also add, by way of introduction, a simple sketch of the town itself and its general conditions before these remarkable events occurred.

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

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

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

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

'Be silent,' I cried, 'thou profane one!' And the women were still more indignant than I. 'We shall see, we shall see; when he is ill and would give his soul for something to wet his lips, his *bon Dieu*

will not do much for him,' cried one; and another said, clasping her hands with a shrill cry, 'It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves!'

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

'Yes, Jean Pierre,' I said, 'it is worse than short—it is brutal. I hope no man who respects himself will ever countenance it. It is against the dignity of human nature, if nothing more.'

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

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

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

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

‘It is our duty at all times to respect the convictions of others,’ I said, severely; and passed on to my own house, having no desire to encourage discussions at the street corner. A man in my position is obliged to be always mindful of the example he ought to set. But I had not yet done with this phrase, which had, as I have said, caught my ear and my imagination. My mother was in the great *salle* of the *rez-de-chausée*, as I passed, in altercation with a peasant who had just brought us in some loads of wood. There is often, it seems to me, a sort of *refrain* in conversation, which one catches everywhere as one comes and goes. Figure my astonishment when I heard from the lips of my good mother the same words with which that good-for-nothing Jacques Richard had made the profession of his brutal faith. ‘Go!’ she cried, in anger; ‘you are all

the same. Money is your god. *De grosses pièces*, that is all you think of in these days.'

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

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

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

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

'Oh, I will answer for *les morts*! they will give nobody any trouble,' he said with a laugh. I went in and reproved the man severely, finding that, as I supposed, he had attempted to cheat my good mother in the price of the wood. Fortunately she had been quite as clever as he was. She went upstairs shaking her head, while I gave the man to understand that no one should speak to her but with the profoundest respect in my house. 'She has her opinions, like all respectable ladies,' I said, 'but under this roof these opinions shall always be sacred.' And, to do him justice, I

will add that when it was put to him in this way Gros-Jean was ashamed of himself.

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

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

I said this, of course, to please my Agnès, who is the best of wives; but on thinking it over after, I could not but be struck with the extreme justice (not to speak of the beauty of the sentiment) of this thought. The *bon Dieu*—if, indeed, that great Being is as represented to us by the Church—must naturally care as much for one-half of His creatures as for the other, though they have not the same weight in the world; and consequently the faith of the women must hold the balance straight, especially if, as is said, they exceed us in point of numbers. This leaves a little margin for those of them who profess the same freedom of thought as is generally accorded to men—a class, I must add, which I abominate from the bottom of my heart.

I need not dwell upon other little scenes which impressed the same idea still more upon my mind. Semur, I need not say, is not the centre of the world, and might, therefore, be supposed likely to escape the full current of worldliness. We amuse ourselves little, and we have not any opportunity of rising to the heights of ambition; for our town is not even the *chef-lieu* of the

department,—though this is a subject upon which I cannot trust myself to speak. Figure to yourself that La Rochette—a place of yesterday, without either the beauty or the antiquity of Semur—has been chosen as the centre of affairs, the residence of M. le Préfet! But I will not enter upon this question. What I was saying was, that, notwithstanding the fact that we amuse ourselves but little, that there is no theatre to speak of, little society, few distractions, and none of those inducements to strive for gain and to indulge the senses, which exist, for instance, in Paris—that capital of the world—yet, nevertheless, the thirst for money and for pleasure has increased among us to an extent which I cannot but consider alarming. Gros-Jean, our peasant, toils for money, and hoards; Jacques, who is a cooper and maker of wine casks, gains and drinks; Jean Pierre snatches at every sous that comes in his way, and spends it in yet worse dissipations. He is one who quails when he meets my eye; he sins *en cachette*; but Jacques is bold, and defies opinion; and Gros-Jean is firm in the belief that to hoard money is the highest of mortal occupations. These three are types of what the population is at Semur. The men would all sell their souls for a *grosse pièce* of fifty sous—indeed, they would laugh, and express their delight that any one should believe them to love souls, if they could but have a chance of selling them; and the devil, who was once supposed to deal in that commodity, would be very welcome among us. And as for the *bon Dieu—pouff!* that was an affair of the grandmothers—*le bon Dieu c'est l'argent*. This is their creed. I was very near the beginning of my official year as Maire when my attention was called to these matters as I have described above. A man may go on for years keeping quiet himself—keeping out of tumult, religious or political—and make no discovery of the general current of feeling; but when you are forced to serve your country in any official capacity, and when your eyes are opened to

the state of affairs around you, then I allow that an inexperienced observer might well cry out, as my wife did, ‘What will become of the world?’ I am not prejudiced myself—unnecessary to say that the foolish scruples of the women do not move me. But the devotion of the community at large to this pursuit of gain-money without any grandeur, and pleasure without any refinement—that is a thing which cannot fail to wound all who believe in human nature. To be a millionaire—that, I grant, would be pleasant. A man as rich as Monte Christo, able to do whatever he would, with the equipage of an English duke, the palace of an Italian prince, the retinue of a Russian noble—he, indeed, might be excused if his money seemed to him a kind of god. But Gros-Jean, who lays up two sous at a time, and lives on black bread and an onion; and Jacques, whose *grosse pièce* but secures him the headache of a drunkard next morning—what to them could be this miserable deity? As for myself, however, it was my business, as Maire of the commune, to take as little notice as possible of the follies these people might say, and to hold the middle course between the prejudices of the respectable and the levities of the foolish. With this, without more, to think of, I had enough to keep all my faculties employed.

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

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

wonderful facts to which every citizen of Semur can bear witness. In this capacity it has become my duty so to arrange and edit the different accounts of the mystery, as to present one coherent and trustworthy chronicle to the world.

To proceed, however, with my narrative. It is not necessary for me to describe what summer is in the Haute Bourgogne. Our generous wines, our glorious fruits, are sufficient proof, without any assertion on my part. The summer with us is as a perpetual *fête*—at least, before the insect appeared it was so, though now anxiety about the condition of our vines may cloud our enjoyment of the glorious sunshine which ripens them hourly before our eyes. Judge, then, of the astonishment of the world when there suddenly came upon us a darkness as in the depth of winter, falling, without warning, into the midst of the brilliant weather to which we are accustomed, and which had never failed us before in the memory of man! It was the month of July, when, in ordinary seasons, a cloud is so rare that it is a joy to see one, merely as a variety upon the brightness. Suddenly, in the midst of our summer delights, this darkness came. Its first appearance took us so entirely by surprise that life seemed to stop short, and the business of the whole town was delayed by an hour or two; nobody being able to believe that at six o'clock in the morning the sun had not risen. I do not assert that the sun did not rise; all I mean to say is that at Semur it was still dark, as in a morning of winter, and when it gradually and slowly became day many hours of the morning were already spent. And never shall I forget the aspect of day when it came. It was like a ghost or pale shadow of the glorious days of July with which we are usually blessed. The barometer did not go down, nor was there any rain, but an unusual greyness wrapped earth and sky. I heard people say in the streets, and I am aware that the same words came

to my own lips: 'If it were not full summer, I should say it was going to snow.' We have much snow in the Haute Bourgogne, and we are well acquainted with this aspect of the skies. Of the depressing effect which this greyness exercised upon myself personally, greyness exercised upon myself personally, I will not speak. I have always been noted as a man of fine perceptions, and I was aware instinctively that such a state of the atmosphere must mean something more than was apparent on the surface. But, as the danger was of an entirely unprecedented character, it is not to be wondered at that I should be completely at a loss to divine what its meaning was. It was a blight some people said; and many were of opinion that it was caused by clouds of animalculæ coming, as is described in ancient writings, to destroy the crops, and even to affect the health of the population. The doctors scoffed at this; but they talked about malaria, which, as far as I could understand, was likely to produce exactly the same effect. The night closed in early as the day had dawned late; the lamps were lighted before six o'clock, and daylight had only begun about ten! Figure to yourself, a July day! There ought to have been a moon almost at the full; but no moon was visible, no stars—nothing but a grey veil of clouds, growing darker and darker as the moments went on; such I have heard are the days and the nights in England, where the sea-fogs so often blot out the sky. But we are unacquainted with anything of the kind in our *plaisant pays de France*. There was nothing else talked of in Semur all that night, as may well be imagined. My own mind was extremely uneasy. Do what I would, I could not deliver myself from a sense of something dreadful in the air which was neither malaria nor animalculæ, I took a promenade through the streets that evening, accompanied by M. Barbou, my *adjoint*, to make sure that all was safe; and the darkness was such that we almost lost our way, though we were both born in the town and had

known every turning from our boyhood. It cannot be denied that Semur is very badly lighted. We retain still the lanterns slung by cords across the streets which once were general in France, but which, in most places, have been superseded by the modern institution of gas. Gladly would I have distinguished my term of office by bringing gas to Semur. But the expense would have been great, and there were a hundred objections. In summer generally, the lanterns were of little consequence because of the brightness of the sky; but to see them now, twinkling dimly here and there, making us conscious how dark it was, was strange indeed. It was in the interests of order that we took our round, with a fear, in my mind at least, of I knew not what. M. l'Adjoint said nothing, but no doubt he thought as I did.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘If M. le Maire will excuse me,’ said M. Barbou, ‘I think I will go home. It is a little cold, and you are aware that I am always afraid of the damp.’ In fact, our coats were beaded with a cold dew as in November, and I could not but acknowledge that my respectable colleague had reason. Besides, we were close to his house, and he

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