

HIS MASTERPIECE

By Émile Zola

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PREFACE

‘HIS MASTERPIECE,’ which in the original French bears the title of *L'Œuvre*, is a strikingly accurate story of artistic life in Paris during the latter years of the Second Empire. Amusing at times, extremely pathetic and even painful at others, it not only contributes a necessary element to the Rougon-Macquart series of novels—a series illustrative of all phases of life in France within certain dates—but it also represents a particular period of M. Zola’s own career and work. Some years, indeed, before the latter had made himself known at all widely as a novelist, he had acquired among Parisian painters and sculptors considerable notoriety as a revolutionary art critic, a fervent champion of that ‘Open-air’ school which came into being during the Second Empire, and which found its first real master in Edouard Manet, whose then derided works are regarded, in these later days, as masterpieces. Manet died before his genius was fully recognised; still he lived long enough to reap some measure of recognition and to see his influence triumph in more than one respect among his brother artists. Indeed, few if any painters left a stronger mark on the art of the second half of the nineteenth century than he did, even though the school, which he suggested rather than established, lapsed largely into mere impressionism—a term, by the way, which he himself coined already in 1858; for it is an error to attribute it—as is often done—to his friend and junior, Claude Monet.

It was at the time of the Salon of 1866 that M. Zola, who criticised that exhibition in the *Evenement* newspaper,* first came to the

front as an art critic, slashing out, to right and left, with all the vigour of a born combatant, and championing M. Manet—whom he did not as yet know personally—with a fervour born of the strongest convictions. He had come to the conclusion that the derided painter was being treated with injustice, and that opinion sufficed to throw him into the fray; even as, in more recent years, the belief that Captain Dreyfus was innocent impelled him in like manner to plead that unfortunate officer's cause. When M. Zola first championed Manet and his disciples he was only twenty-six years old, yet he did not hesitate to pit himself against men who were regarded as the most eminent painters and critics of France; and although (even as in the Dreyfus case) the only immediate result of his campaign was to bring him hatred and contumely, time, which always has its revenges, has long since shown how right he was in forecasting the ultimate victory of Manet and his principal methods.

* Some of the articles will be found in the volume of his miscellaneous writings entitled *Mes Haines*.

In those days M. Zola's most intimate friend—a companion of his boyhood and youth—was Paul Cézanne, a painter who developed talent as an impressionist; and the lives of Cézanne and Manet, as well as that of a certain rather dissolute engraver, who sat for the latter's famous picture *Le Bon Bock*, suggested to M. Zola the novel which he has called *L'Œuvre*. Claude Lantier, the chief character in the book, is, of course, neither Cézanne nor Manet, but from the careers of those two painters, M. Zola has borrowed many little touches and incidents.* The poverty which falls to Claude's lot is taken from the life of Cézanne, for Manet—the only son of a judge—was almost wealthy. Moreover, Manet married very happily, and in no wise led the pitiful existence which in the novel

is ascribed to Claude Lantier and his helpmate, Christine. The original of the latter was a poor woman who for many years shared the life of the engraver to whom I have alluded; and, in that connection, it is well to mention that what may be called the Bennecourt episode of the novel is virtually photographed from life.

* So far as Manet is concerned, the curious reader may consult M. Antonin Proust's interesting 'Souvenirs,' published in the *Revue Blanche*, early in 1897.

Whilst, however, Claude Lantier, the hero of *L'Œuvre*, is unlike Manet in so many respects, there is a close analogy between the artistic theories and practices of the real painter and the imaginary one. Several of Claude's pictures are Manet's, slightly modified. For instance, the former's painting, 'In the Open Air,' is almost a replica of the latter's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* ('A Lunch on the Grass'), shown at the Salon of the Rejected in 1863. Again, many of the sayings put into Claude's mouth in the novel are really sayings of Manet's. And Claude's fate, at the end of the book, is virtually that of a moody young fellow who long assisted Manet in his studio, preparing his palette, cleaning his brushes, and so forth. This lad, whom Manet painted in *L'Enfant aux Cerises* ('The Boy with the Cherries'), had artistic aspirations of his own and, being unable to justify them, ended by hanging himself.

I had just a slight acquaintance with Manet, whose studio I first visited early in my youth, and though the exigencies of life led me long ago to cast aside all artistic ambition of my own, I have been for more than thirty years on friendly terms with members of the French art world. Thus it would be comparatively easy for me to identify a large number of the characters and the incidents figuring in 'His Masterpiece'; but I doubt if such identification would have

any particular interest for English readers. I will just mention that Mahoudeau, the sculptor, is, in a measure, Solari, another friend of M. Zola's boyhood and youth; that Fagerolles, in his main features, is Gervex; and that Bongrand is a commingling of Courbet, Cabanel and Gustave Flaubert. For instance, his so-called 'Village Wedding' is suggested by Courbet's 'Funeral at Ornans'; his friendship for Claude is Cabanel's friendship for Manet; whilst some of his mannerisms, such as his dislike for the praise accorded to certain of his works, are simply those of Flaubert, who (like Balzac in the case of *Eugenie Grandet*) almost invariably lost his temper if one ventured to extol *Madame Bovary* in his presence. Courbet, by the way, so far as disposition goes, crops up again in M. Zola's pages in the person of Champbouvard, a sculptor, who, artistically, is a presentment of Clesinger.

I now come to a personage of a very different character, Pierre Sandoz, clerk, journalist, and novelist; and Sandoz, it may be frankly admitted, is simply M. Zola himself. Personal appearance, life, habits, opinions, all are those of the novelist at a certain period of his career; and for this reason, no doubt, many readers of 'His Masterpiece' will find Sandoz the most interesting personage in the book. It is needless, I think, to enter into particulars on the subject. The reader may take it from me that everything attributed in the following pages to Pierre Sandoz was done, experienced, felt or said by Émile Zola. In this respect, then 'His Masterpiece' is virtually M. Zola's 'David Copperfield'—the book into which he has put most of his real life. I may also mention, perhaps, that the long walks on the quays of Paris which in the narrative are attributed to Claude Lantier are really M. Zola's walks; for, in his youth, when he vainly sought employment after failing in his examinations, he was wont, at times of great discouragement, to

roam the Paris quays, studying their busy life and their picturesque vistas, whenever he was not poring over the second-hand books set out for sale upon their parapets. From a purely literary standpoint, the pictures of the quays and the Seine to be found in *L'Œuvre* are perhaps the best bits of the book, though it is all of interest, because it is essentially a *livre vecu*, a work really 'lived' by its author. And if in the majority of its characters, those readers possessing some real knowledge of French art life find one man's qualities blended with another's defects, the appearance of a third, and the habits of a fourth, the whole none the less makes a picture of great fidelity to life and truth. This is the Parisian art world as it really was, with nothing improbable or overstrained in the narrative, save its very first chapter, in which romanticism is certainly allowed full play.

It is quite possible that some readers may not judge Claude Lantier, the 'hero,' very favourably; he is like the dog in the fable who forsakes the substance for the shadow; but it should be borne in mind that he is only in part responsible for his actions, for the fatal germ of insanity has been transmitted to him from his great-grandmother. He is, indeed, the son of Gervaise, the heroine of *L'Assommoir* ('The Dram Shop'), by her lover Lantier. And Gervaise, it may be remembered, was the daughter of Antoine Macquart (of 'The Fortune of the Rougons' and 'Dr. Pascal'), the latter being the illegitimate son of Adelaide Fouque, from whom sprang the insanity of the Rougon-Macquarts. At the same time, whatever view may be taken of Claude's artistic theories, whatever interest his ultimate fate may inspire, it cannot be denied that his opinions on painting are very ably expressed, and that his 'case,' from a pathological point of view, is diagnosticated by M. Zola with all the skill of a physician. Moreover, there can be but one

opinion concerning the helpmate of his life, the poor devoted Christine; and no one possessed of feeling will be able to read the history of little Jacques unmoved.

Stories of artistic life are not as a rule particularly popular with English readers, but this is not surprising when one remembers that those who take a genuine interest in art, in this country, are still a small minority. Quite apart from artistic matters, however, there is, I think, an abundance of human interest in the pages of 'His Masterpiece,' and thus I venture to hope that the present version, which I have prepared as carefully as my powers permit, will meet with the favour of those who have supported me, for a good many years now, in my endeavours to make the majority of M. Zola's works accessible in this country.

E. A. V.

MERTON, SURREY.

HIS MASTERPIECE

I

CLAUDE was passing in front of the Hôtel de Ville, and the clock was striking two o'clock in the morning when the storm burst forth. He had been roaming forgetfully about the Central Markets, during that burning July night, like a loitering artist enamoured of nocturnal Paris. Suddenly the raindrops came down, so large and thick, that he took to his heels and rushed, wildly bewildered, along the Quai de la Grève. But on reaching the Pont Louis Philippe he pulled up, ragefully breathless; he considered this fear of the rain to be idiotic; and so amid the pitch-like darkness, under the lashing shower which drowned the gas-jets, he crossed the bridge slowly, with his hands dangling by his side.

He had only a few more steps to go. As he was turning on to the Quai Bourbon, on the Isle of St. Louis, a sharp flash of lightning illumined the straight, monotonous line of old houses bordering the narrow road in front of the Seine. It blazed upon the panes of the high, shutterless windows, showing up the melancholy frontages of the old-fashioned dwellings in all their details; here a stone balcony, there the railing of a terrace, and there a garland sculptured on a frieze. The painter had his studio close by, under the eaves of the old Hôtel du Martoy, nearly at the corner of the Rue de la Femme-sans-Tête.* So he went on while the quay, after flashing forth for a moment, relapsed into darkness, and a terrible thunder-clap shook the drowsy quarter.

* The street of the Headless woman.—ED.

When Claude, blinded by the rain, got to his door—a low, rounded door, studded with iron—he fumbled for the bell knob, and he was exceedingly surprised—indeed, he started—on finding a living, breathing body huddled against the woodwork. Then, by the light of a second flash, he perceived a tall young girl, dressed in black, and drenched already, who was shivering with fear. When a second thunder-clap had shaken both of them, Claude exclaimed:

‘How you frighten one! Who are you, and what do you want?’

He could no longer see her; he only heard her sob, and stammer:

‘Oh, monsieur, don’t hurt me. It’s the fault of the driver, whom I hired at the station, and who left me at this door, after ill-treating me. Yes, a train ran off the rails, near Nevers. We were four hours late, and a person who was to wait for me had gone. Oh, dear me; I have never been in Paris before, and I don’t know where I am...’

Another blinding flash cut her short, and with dilated eyes she stared, terror-stricken, at that part of the strange capital, that violet-tinted apparition of a fantastic city. The rain had ceased falling. On the opposite bank of the Seine was the Quai des Ormes, with its small grey houses variegated below by the woodwork of their shops and with their irregular roofs boldly outlined above, while the horizon suddenly became clear on the left as far as the blue slate eaves of the Hôtel de Ville, and on the right as far as the leaden-hued dome of St. Paul. What startled her most of all, however, was the hollow of the stream, the deep gap in which the Seine flowed, black and turgid, from the heavy piles of the Pont Marie, to the light arches of the new Pont Louis Philippe. Strange masses peopled the river, a sleeping flotilla of small boats and yawls, a floating washhouse, and a dredger moored to the quay.

Then, farther down, against the other bank, were lighters, laden with coals, and barges full of mill stone, dominated as it were by the gigantic arm of a steam crane. But, suddenly, everything disappeared again.

Claude had an instinctive distrust of women—that story of an accident, of a belated train and a brutal cabman, seemed to him a ridiculous invention. At the second thunder-clap the girl had shrunk farther still into her corner, absolutely terrified.

‘But you cannot stop here all night,’ he said.

She sobbed still more and stammered, ‘I beseech you, monsieur, take me to Passy. That’s where I was going.’

He shrugged his shoulders. Did she take him for a fool? Mechanically, however, he turned towards the Quai des Célestins, where there was a cabstand. Not the faintest glimmer of a lamp to be seen.

‘To Passy, my dear? Why not to Versailles? Where do you think one can pick up a cab at this time of night, and in such weather?’

Her only answer was a shriek; for a fresh flash of lightning had almost blinded her, and this time the tragic city had seemed to her to be spattered with blood. An immense chasm had been revealed, the two arms of the river stretching far away amidst the lurid flames of a conflagration. The smallest details had appeared: the little closed shutters of the Quai des Ormes, and the two openings of the Rue de la Masure, and the Rue du Paon-Blanc, which made breaks in the line of frontages; then near the Pont Marie one could have counted the leaves on the lofty plane trees, which there form a bouquet of magnificent verdure; while on the other side, beneath

the Pont Louis Philippe, at the Mail, the barges, ranged in a quadruple line, had flared with the piles of yellow apples with which they were heavily laden. And there was also the ripple of the water, the high chimney of the floating washhouse, the tightened chain of the dredger, the heaps of sand on the banks, indeed, an extraordinary agglomeration of things, quite a little world filling the great gap which seemed to stretch from one horizon to the other. But the sky became dark again, and the river flowed on, all obscurity, amid the crashing of the thunder.

‘Thank heaven it’s over. Oh, heaven! what’s to become of me?’

Just then the rain began to fall again, so stiffly and impelled by so strong a wind that it swept along the quay with the violence of water escaping through an open lock.

‘Come, let me get in,’ said Claude; ‘I can stand this no longer.’

Both were getting drenched. By the flickering light of the gas lamp at the corner of the Rue de la Femme-sans-Tête the young man could see the water dripping from the girl’s dress, which was clinging to her skin, in the deluge that swept against the door. He was seized with compassion. Had he not once picked up a cur on such a stormy night as this? Yet he felt angry with himself for softening. He never had anything to do with women; he treated them all as if ignorant of their existence, with a painful timidity which he disguised under a mask of bravado. And that girl must really think him a downright fool, to bamboozle him with that story of adventure—only fit for a farce. Nevertheless, he ended by saying, ‘That’s enough. You had better come in out of the wet. You can sleep in my rooms.’

But at this the girl became even more frightened, and threw up her arms.

‘In your rooms? Oh! good heavens. No, no; it’s impossible. I beseech you, monsieur, take me to Passy. Let me beg of you.’

But Claude became angry. Why did she make all this fuss, when he was willing to give her shelter? He had already rung the bell twice. At last the door opened and he pushed the girl before him.

‘No, no, monsieur; I tell you, no—’

But another flash dazzled her, and when the thunder growled she bounded inside, scarce knowing what she was about. The heavy door had closed upon them, she was standing under a large archway in complete darkness.

‘It’s I, Madame Joseph,’ cried Claude to the doorkeeper. Then he added, in a whisper, ‘Give me your hand, we have to cross the courtyard.’

The girl did as she was told; she no longer resisted; she was overwhelmed, worn out. Once more they encountered the diluvian rain, as they ran side by side as hard as they could across the yard. It was a baronial courtyard, huge, and surrounded with stone arcades, indistinct amidst the gloom. However, they came to a narrow passage without a door, and he let go her hand. She could hear him trying to strike some matches, and swearing. They were all damp. It was necessary for them to grope their way upstairs.

‘Take hold of the banisters, and be careful,’ said Claude; ‘the steps are very high.’

The staircase, a very narrow one, a former servants' staircase, was divided into three lofty flights, which she climbed, stumbling, with unskilful, weary limbs. Then he warned her that they had to turn down a long passage. She kept behind him, touching the walls on both sides with her outstretched hands, as she advanced along that endless passage which bent and came back to the front of the building on the quay. Then there were still other stairs right under the roof—creaking, shaky wooden stairs, which had no banister, and suggested the unplanned rungs of a miller's ladder. The landing at the top was so small that the girl knocked against the young man, as he fumbled in his pocket for his key. At last, however, he opened the door.

'Don't come in, but wait, else you'll hurt yourself again.'

She did not stir. She was panting for breath, her heart was beating fast, there was a buzzing in her ears, and she felt indeed exhausted by that ascent in the dense gloom. It seemed to her as if she had been climbing for hours, in such a maze, amidst such a turning and twisting of stairs that she would never be able to find her way down again. Inside the studio there was a shuffling of heavy feet, a rustling of hands groping in the dark, a clatter of things being tumbled about, accompanied by stifled objurgations. At last the doorway was lighted up.

'Come in, it's all right now.'

She went in and looked around her, without distinguishing anything. The solitary candle burned dim in that garret, more than fifteen feet high, and filled with a confused jumble of things whose big shadows showed fantastically on the walls, which were painted in grey distemper. No, she did not distinguish anything. She

mechanically raised her eyes to the large studio-window, against which the rain was beating with a deafening roll like that of a drum, but at that moment another flash of lightning illumined the sky, followed almost immediately by a thunder-clap that seemed to split the roof. Dumb-stricken, pale as death, she dropped upon a chair.

‘The devil!’ muttered Claude, who also was rather pale. ‘That clap wasn’t far off. We were just in time. It’s better here than in the streets, isn’t it?’

Then he went towards the door, closed it with a bang and turned the key, while she watched him with a dazed look.

‘There, now, we are at home.’

But it was all over. There were only a few more thunder-claps in the distance, and the rain soon ceased altogether. Claude, who was now growing embarrassed, had examined the girl, askance. She seemed by no means bad looking, and assuredly she was young: twenty at the most. This scrutiny had the effect of making him more suspicious of her still, in spite of an unconscious feeling, a vague idea, that she was not altogether deceiving him. In any case, no matter how clever she might be, she was mistaken if she imagined she had caught him. To prove this he wilfully exaggerated his gruffness and curtness of manner.

Her very anguish at his words and demeanour made her rise, and in her turn she examined him, though without daring to look him straight in the face. And the aspect of that bony young man, with his angular joints and wild bearded face, increased her fears. With his black felt hat and his old brown coat, discoloured by long usage, he looked like a kind of brigand.

Directly he told her to make herself at home and go to bed, for he placed his bed at her disposal, she shrinkingly replied: ‘Thank you; I’ll do very well as I am; I’ll not undress.’

‘But your clothes are dripping,’ he retorted. ‘Come now, don’t make an idiot of yourself.’

And thereupon he began to knock about the chairs, and flung aside an old screen, behind which she noticed a washstand and a tiny iron bedstead, from which he began to remove the coverlet.

‘No, no, monsieur, it isn’t worth while; I assure you that I shall stay here.’

At this, however, Claude became angry, gesticulating and shaking his fists.

‘How much more of this comedy are we to have?’ said he. ‘As I give you my bed, what have you to complain of? You need not pay any attention to me. I shall sleep on that couch.’

He strode towards her with a threatening look, and thereupon, beside herself with fear, thinking that he was going to strike her, she tremblingly unfastened her hat. The water was dripping from her skirts. He kept on growling. Nevertheless, a sudden scruple seemed to come to him, for he ended by saying, condescendingly:

‘Perhaps you don’t like to sleep in my sheets. I’ll change them.’

He at once began dragging them from the bed and flinging them on to the couch at the other end of the studio. And afterwards he took a clean pair from the wardrobe and began to make the bed with all the deftness of a bachelor accustomed to that kind of thing. He

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