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THE INSIDE OF A STAGE COACH.

(Translated from the French of Souvestre.)

One of the last days of September the rain had fallen all day in torrents, but finally, having ceased, left the sky so enveloped in fog that, though scarcely four o'clock, night seemed already to have overspread the earth.

A heavy diligence, with its relay of horses, ascended with difficulty one of the hills which separate Belleville from Lyons, while the postillions walked on each side of the team, pausing about every fifty steps to breathe and recover themselves. The wearied passengers had descended by invitation of the conductor, and were trudging along in no amiable mood, scolding the horses, the rain, and the miserable roads. Two of them, who came last, stopped suddenly at the turning of the ascent. One was a man nearly fifty years old, with a mild and smiling countenance; but the other, much younger, had an air of gloom and dissatisfaction. Throwing his eyes over the surrounding country, half enveloped in fog, he said to his companion:—

'What weather and what a year, Cousin Grugel! The Saone has hardly entered its bed, and the valleys are again inundated.'

'God preserve us, Gontran,' replied the man with the mild countenance; 'the rainbow can appear any moment above the deluge.'

'Yes,' replied the other traveller, with slight irony; 'I know your mania of hope, Jacques.'

'And I yours of discouragement, Darvon.'

'Well, I am right when I examine how this world goes. Where do you see peace, order, or prosperity? I only hear of incendiaries, contagion, deluge, and murder. What man's wickedness spares, the wickedness of nature annihilates, for even brute matter seems to possess the instinct of destruction; and the elements, like kings, cannot remain neighbors without warring against each other.'

'That is only one side of things, my cousin—the sad side; but of the other you never speak. Your eyes are riveted on the volcano which dims the horizon, but you cannot lower them to the fields of ripe corn undulating at your feet. There is happiness in the world, if you can make up your mind to believe it.'

'Well, I know nothing of it,' replied Darvon, in a tone of vexation.

'But, yourself considered, may you not be placed among the most favored?'

'True, Jacques, and yet I have not been able to find, in all the good accorded me, either peace or contentment.'

'What have you to wish for? You are rich, honored, and have a family who love you.'

'Yes,' replied Gontran; 'but this same fortune has cost me the law-suit for which I have just made the third voyage to Macon; my good reputation has not deterred the opposing lawyer from slander; and as to my family—'

'Well?' inquired Jacques.

'Well! my sister, with whom I always lived so affectionately, has just quarrelled with me.'

'It will be a short quarrel.'

'No, no; I am tired of working without profit to establish order in her affairs. I have been too much annoyed by her want of system and reason.'

'Think of her excellent heart and you will forgive her.'

'Oh! I know that you will always find a good reason for me to bear my sorrows patiently, you have a recipe for every wound of the soul, and if I press you a little, you will prove me in the wrong to complain, and that all is quite right here below.'

'Pardon me,' replied Grugel; 'in the government of this world I find much to wound me, but I am not sure I am the best judge. Life is a great mystery, of which we comprehend so little. Must I own it to you, there are hours when I persuade myself that God has not afflicted me with so many scourges without intention. Happy and invulnerable, they could be endured; each one could count on his individual strength, delight in his own isolation, and refuse all sympathy to his fellow being. But weakness has no such resource; on the contrary, it forces men to be friendly, to aid and love one another. Grief has become a bond of sympathy, and we owe to our noblest and best sentiments, gratitude, devotion and piety.'

'Well done,' said Darvon, smiling; 'not being able to sustain the good in all things, you give me the bright side of evil.'

'Perhaps so,' said Grugel; 'only be sure that evil itself is not absolute. Science borrows its remedies from the sap of venomous plants; why, then, may we not from passion, misfortune, or inequality draw much that is good? Believe me, Darvon, there is no human dross, however poor, without its particles of gold.'

'In good faith, then, I would like to know what can be found in our travelling companions,' cried Gontran. 'Let us see, cousin; suppose we put to the test these curious patterns of our race, as we proclaim it so intelligent.'

'It is very certain,' said Jacques, smiling, 'fate has not favored us.'

'Never mind, never mind,' replied Darvon, whose misanthropy was niggardly in its character; 'disengage the gold from the dross, as you say. But first, how many grains do you expect to find in this cattle merchant before us?'

Grugel raised his head and saw, a few steps in advance of the traveller who had called him cousin, a coarse man in a blue blouse, following with heavy steps the side of the road, while finishing his well picked chicken-bone.

'I declare, that is the seventh repast I have seen him make to day,' continued Darvon, 'and the coach-pockets are still laden with his provisions. When he has eaten enough, he goes to sleep, then he eats again, then goes to sleep in order to recommence his programme. He is a mere digesting machine, too imbecile to draw from him either response or information.'

Our companion with the felt hat can sufficiently acquit himself in that respect.'

'Ah! yes, let us consider him and try also to extract his gold. He joined our party only this morning, and already the conductor has sent him from the *imperiale* to the travellers in the *coupe* who again have sent him to the *interieur*. We have had him but two hours, and he has already given us his own and his family history to the fifth degree. I know his name is Peter Lepree, that for twenty years he has been commissioner of colonial produce in the departments of the Saone and Loire, of Ain, Isere, and of the Rhone, and he has been married three times.—Then if you did not have to hear his questioning; but he is equally talkative and curious, and when his confession is finished, he awaits yours. If you are reflecting, he speaks to you; if you speak he interrupts you. His voice is like a rattle in constant motion, the noise of which ends in making you nervous.'

'Poor Lepree,' said Grugel; 'at heart, after all, he is a worthy man.'

'He has one merit,' replied Darvon, 'that of annoying Mademoiselle Athenais de Locherais; for we almost forgot this amiable fellow traveller who, after recommending us all to get out to lighten the coach, remained in herself so as not to dampen her feet.'

'You must forgive her,' observed Jacques; 'isolation has made her forget all ease of others; her heart is contracted.'

'Contracted!' repeated Gontran, 'you are deceived, cousin; Mademoiselle Athenais has a great deal of love for herself. The whole world seems to have been made for her special ease, and she can imagine nothing in it that does not bear upon her in some way or other. She is one of those sweet creature who, hearing the cry of the midnight assassin, returns to her pillow complaining of having been awakened.'

Grugel was going to reply, but they had arrived at the top of the hill. The conductor, calling the passengers, urged them to remount, as a courier had just appeared with an announcement, that, owing to the overflow of the Saone, the passage by Villefranche would be impossible, and that in order to reach Anse they would be obliged to turn more to the right, passing the Niseran higher up and taking another road. The coach which had just preceded them, not having taken this precaution, had been surprised by the waters, and some of the passengers were reported to have been drowned. Happily this last intelligence was not communicated to the travellers, but they vociferated loudly when apprised of the by-road they were obliged to take.

'There is a malediction on us,' said Gontran, already very peevish with the length of the journey.

'I knew it would be so, sir,' cried Pierre Lepree, with volubility. The two postillions had just escaped from him, so he fell back on his travelling companions. 'I was told on my way that the Ardieres and Vauzanne had risen considerably; indeed, we cannot tell if we can pass to Anse, where we may encounter the waters of the Azergues and the Brevanne. Where in the world are you taking us, conductor? Well, I know the mayor, a thin man, always smoking.—But, speaking of this, can we not stop again before we come to Anse?'

'Impossible,' replied the conductor, brusquely; 'I am now eight hours behind time.'

'Gracious! where will we sup, then?' cried the fat cattle-merchant.

'We won't sup at all, sir.'

'I declare, I wish I had some broth,' interrupted Mademoiselle Athenais, in a shrill voice, with head out of the coach door; 'I always take my broth at five o'clock.'

'We have had nothing since morning,' cried all the travellers.

'Get in, gentlemen,' called out the conductor; 'one hour's delay may prevent us from reaching there. You can't joke with an overflow, and I don't want my coach drowned.'

'Drowned!' cried Mademoiselle Athenais.—'Why, this is horrible. You shall be informed against, conductor! I demand that you leave

the valley. Why don't you answer me, conductor? I will complain to your chief.'

The diligence starting, cut the old lady's sentence in two, so she fell back in her corner with an exclamation of dissatisfaction.

Jacques Grugel felt himself obliged to tell her that the route they were taking would lead away from the Saone and avoid the danger.

'But where will I get my soup?' inquired she, slightly reassured.

'We will not stop till we reach Anse,' resumed Lepree; 'the conductor has said so, and God only knows what kind of roads we will meet with. Roads of the department; that says everything. And then I know the engineer, a talented man; his son was married the same day as my eldest. But we won't arrive till to-morrow, mark my words.'

'There was a general cry from the passengers. They had eaten nothing since morning, calculating on the lunch usually obtained at Villefranche, and Gontran had already proposed, with his usual vivacity, to make a descent on the first village and force them to serve up a supper, when the cattle-merchant cried out:

'A supper! I have one at your service.'

'What! for everybody?' asked Lepree.

'For everybody, citizen. I can offer you three courses, with your dessert, and something for a healtip.'

While speaking he drew from the pockets of the carriage a half dozen packets, and, rolling his tongue around his mouth, proceeded to open them; they contained provisions of every kind, properly enveloped and tied with care.

'Won't we have a feast?' said Lepree, who had asked the cattle merchant, his inventory, 'my friend, what is your name?'

'Barnau.'

'Good, Mr. Barnau; but what good care you take of yourself.'

'How can a man be at his ease,' said the fat merchant, with a certain pride, 'if he can't eat the best of everything? However, these gentlemen and mademoiselle can judge of my victuals.'

Grugel turned to Gontran, and gave him a significant look.

'Truly,' said he smiling, and in an under voice, 'here are the grains of gold you looked for.'

'Grains of gold!' repeated Barnau, who did not understand him; 'why, man, that's a sausage with truffles.'

'And these gentlemen would have us believe grains of gold are good for famished people,' resumed Pierre Lepree, laughing; 'that is a figure of speech, Monsieur Barnau. I have a son who studied these figures in rhetoric. He explained it all to me; but pardon me, let us first help mademoiselle.'

They presented the food to Mademoiselle de Locherais, who returned each piece, but finally ended by choosing the most delicate, complaining, as she ate, of the privations of travellers.—To console her, Barnau offered her some old brandy; but mademoiselle cried out with horror:

'Brandy to me! What do you take me for, sir?'

'You like sherry better, perhaps,' said the cattle merchant, in a careless way.

'I drink neither sherry nor brandy,' cried Mademoiselle Athenais fiercely. 'I take water only,' she said, turning toward Grugel. 'Did you ever hear anything like this rustic?' she murmured; 'offer me cognac, as if the spices he has given us were not sufficient to burn one's blood. I shall surely be ill from it.'

Finishing what she had to say, she arranged herself in her corner, so as to turn her back on the cattle merchant, picked up a pillow she had with her, leaned her head on it, and fell asleep.

The diligence continued its tedious route.—Though humid, the air was cold, and not a star was to be seen. Relieved by the repast which the gastronomical foresight of Barnau had permitted him to make, Lepree resumed his loquacity, and, although his fellow travellers had long since ceased to answer him, he continued to talk on without being in the least concerned to know if he was listened to.

This noise of words, the slowness of their progress, the darkness, and the cold combined to render the passengers nervously impatient, and every few moments might be heard yawns, shudders, or subdued complaints. Darvon, particularly, seemed more and more excitable; a prey to nervous irritation. He had already opened and shut for the tenth time the blind of the coach door, leaned his head to the right, to the left, and back on the cushion, fixed his legs in every possible position that the narrow space of which he could dispose allowed him; and, finally, at the break of day, his patience was entirely exhausted.

'I would give ten of the days which remain of my life to be at the end of this journey,' cried he.

'Here we are at Anse,' replied Grugel.

'True, upon my word,' said Lepree, who had

been asleep an instant. 'Hallo, conductor, how long do you remain here?'

'Five minutes.'

'Open the door; I am just going to say good day to the postmaster.'

The door was opened, and Barnau got down with Lepree to renew his provisions. Nearly at the same moment the clerk came forward to see if there were any vacant places.

'Only one,' replied Grugel.

'How!' cried Mademoiselle de Locherais, who had just awakened with a start; 'would monsieur by any chance ask any one to come in here?'

'A traveller for Lyons.'

'But it is quite impossible,' resumed the old maid; 'we are already frightfully crowded.—Monsieur, your coaches are too small; I will complain to the administration.'

'Ah! without doubt here is our new companion,' said Grugel, who was looking out of the door. 'M. Lepree has already seized upon him.'

'He is a military man,' cried mademoiselle.

'A non-commissioned officer of the Chasseurs.'

'Oh! is he coming in here? Why don't they make soldiers go on foot?'

'In such a time as this it would be hard and fatiguing for them, mademoiselle.'

'Is it not their trade? Such people are never fatigued. These public conveyances do give you such disagreeable neighbors! . . . The derangement of your usual habits, to have nothing warm, pass the night without sleep, be crowded, choked! . . . I don't see why one of these gentlemen don't get up in the *imperiale*.'

'Notwithstanding the fog?'

'What does that signify, for men?'

'Mademoiselle would be less accommodated,' added Darvon ironically. 'She had better make the proposition herself to our companion.'

'What! I speak to a soldier,' said Mademoiselle Athenais fiercely; 'I prefer being in command, sir.'

'Well, here he is,' said Jacques.

The non-commissioned officer had indeed just appeared before the door, followed by the clerk with whom he was quarrelling. He was a spruce, dapper-looking young man, but his bragging and soldierly manners disgusted Darvon at first sight. He complained of the delay of the coach, having waited for it since the night preceding, and with words abused the clerk of the office, whose responses were timid and embarrassed. At last, the conductor declaring they must start, he came to the coach door and looked inside.

'Magnificent collection,' murmured he, after having cast an impertinent look on the travellers; 'I wonder if the *coupe* and the *rotonde* are as well furnished. Have you no women aboard, conductor?'

'The insolent creature,' murmured Mademoiselle.

'Well,' resumed the soldier, 'one must not be too particular in the country.' And he took his place.

Gontran leaned toward Grugel, and said in a low voice, 'This one completes our collection of absurdities.'

'Take care he don't hear you,' replied Jacques.

Darvon shrugged his shoulders.

'Bragging people inspire more disgust than fear,' said he, 'and this one certainly needs a lesson in politeness.'

Meanwhile, Barnau returned without Lepree. After having looked for the latter at the inn, and waited for him some minutes, the diligence started without him, to the great joy of mademoiselle, who hoped to be more at ease. But her joy short duration, for the non-commissioned officer, who had located himself at first on the other bench, got up and took the seat next to her.—The angry old maid adjusted herself brusquely, and pulled down her veil.

'Ah,' said he, in a mocking tone, 'madame seems afraid of being looked at.'

'Perhaps so, sir,' said she, dryly.

'I quite understand the reason,' resumed the soldier. 'But she can calm her nerves. I can deprive myself of the pleasure.' And as he noticed the movement of indignation of Mademoiselle de Locherais, continued, 'I speak solely for the interest of her health; and to allow her to breathe with her face uncovered, as we want air in this box, I think I had better lower the window.'

'I object to it,' said mademoiselle quickly; 'my doctor has forbidden any exposure to the morning air.'

'And mine has forbidden me to smother,' replied the young man, putting out his hand to open the sash.

But the old maid cried out. The window was on her side, she had a right to have it closed, and appealed to the other travellers.

However little disposed Darvon had been in favor of Mademoiselle de Locherais, he considered it right to defend her, and the result was a sharp discussion between him and the soldier,

which would have ended in trouble had not Grugel ceded his place at the other window.

The soldier accepted it with a bad grace, preserving a strong feeling against Darvon.

Now, the reader has already perceived that Gontran's predominant qualities were neither resignation nor patience. The contrarieties of the journey has excited his sickly inactivity, therefore the disagreement which had already broken out between them was renewed several times, and only awaited a favorable opportunity to become a later quarrel.

Some of the smaller baggage had been placed by Darvon in a net suspended from the top of the diligence; the soldier pretended that it incommoded him, and wished it removed. Gontran refused to do it.

'You have decided it shall remain where it is?' cried the soldier, after a discussion in which he had grown more and more animated.

'Decidedly,' replied Darvon.

'Very well. I will get rid of it by the coach door,' replied the young man, while extending his hand toward the net.

Gontran seized the hand, and said, 'Take care what you do, sir, in a changed voice.—Ever since you came in here, you have tried to make me lose my patience; your whole course has been one of abuse and tyranny, but you may as well understand I am not the man to put up with your tyranny.'

'Is this a challenge?' asked the soldier, throwing on Gontran a disdainful look.

'By no means,' interrupted Grugel, annoyed by the turn affairs had taken; 'my cousin merely wished you to observe—'

'I don't accept the observations of snarlers,' replied Gontran.

At this word insolence the soldier shuddered, a deep redness suffused his features.

'Where do you stop, sir?' asked he of Darvon, in a voice trembling with anger.

'At Lyons,' replied the latter.

'Very well, we will finish our explanation there.'

'So be it.'

Jacques, alarmed, wished to interpose; but his cousin and the soldier spoke at the same time, and repeated they would terminate this affair at Lyons.

At the same instant great cries were heard, and the diligence was overtaken by a wagon entirely covered with mud. Mademoiselle de Locherais put her head out of the coach door.

'O Lord! what a misfortune,' said she; 'Monsieur Pierre Lepree has overtaken us. Now we will be completely filled up.'

As soon as they reached the public conveyance, the commissioner of colonial produce jumped out of the wagon, and presented himself at the coach door, which the conductor had just opened.

'Is this the way you go off without waiting for the passengers?' cried he, furious.

'I warned you three times,' interposed the conductor.

'Six times is customary, sir, or even a dozen; you are very miserly with your words. Does it cost anything to speak? I could not leave the postmaster while he was telling me what happened to the diligence yesterday; for you did not know, gentlemen, that the one that preceded this was drowned.'

'Drowned!' repeated every one.

'Very good,' interrupted the conductor; 'but get in.'

'Anything but good,' responded Pierre Lepree; 'everybody is frightened enough.'

'I beg of you to get up immediately.'

'And what will our families think when they learn this disaster?'

'Be quick, then.'

'Again, there was I trying to obtain these details, when they came to tell me you had gone on without me.'

'And we are going to do the same thing again,' said the impatient conductor.

'Bless me,' cried Lepree, who hastened to get up. 'I have had enough of wagons; here I am, conductor, lift me up.'

The commissioner of provisions was overwhelmed with questions, and he soon related all he had heard; then, interrupting himself, according to his usual habit, and recognizing the young officer, he cried out:

'Oh! this is the gentleman I had the honor of seeing at Anse.'

'The same,' replied the soldier.

'Delighted to meet you again,' said Lepree.—'Whatever you may think of me, I am the born friend of all the military. I should have had to serve myself if they had not found a substitute for me.'

He was interrupted by Mademoiselle Athenais, who just perceived that he was quite wet.

'It is this abominable fog,' said he, while wiping the water off with his handkerchief.

'But people don't come into a carriage in such a condition,' replied mademoiselle, in a discon-