

I Today Understand Many Things

Georges Darien

1890

It seems like centuries since I arrived at the disciplinary company but it's only two months. Time has never seemed to pass so slowly; days have more than twenty-four hours here. Of all the painful sensations that assailed me at the beginning and which little by little abandon me, that of time's eternal dragging out is the only one that persists. It grows in intensity every day. It exhausts me, it causes me despair because it forces me to think, and I want to no longer think. I want to live like an animal. Like an ox taken from his stable each morning, head bowed under his yoke, who today lays out a row, and tomorrow a parallel row, endlessly trampling the same closed field under the same closed horizon. Impassive, habituated to the weight of the plow, not feeling the oxherd's whip.

The whip lashes I feel are the insults. They don't spare me anything, the sergeants, during the endless days that resemble each other, including Sundays, dedicated to "cleanliness detail." If I take part in an exercise, if I participate in a review, if I wipe sweat from my brow while I'm working, insults rain down on me.

"They're looking for you," Queslier told me. "They probably don't like your mug. They want to find a pretext to put you in the slammer and from there send you to the military tribunal. Don't say anything; don't answer them."

I don't answer. I swallow their insults in silence; I close my ears to their provocations. Even so, it's tough. I don't know if I have the courage to put up with this for the thirty-four months left to me. Even repeating to myself that it is mud that makes us filthy and that these people who so cowardly go after me are animals and lowlives doesn't help.

Yes, they're animals and lowlives, these non-coms and corporals who have as little heart as they do brains, these men who ask to be allowed to exercise the profession of overseer against those they should consider as brothers, as soldiers like them. How base and vile is the life they lead. If they were able to understand anything, how sad they would find their existence. Hated, held in contempt, perhaps even judging themselves contemptible, they do what they can to avenge themselves for the disdain and disgust that they feel weighing on them. And they stop at nothing. They don't hesitate before brutalities, lies, provocations, or slander. There is no method they won't employ, there is no low and vile maneuver they won't use in order to win out over any individual who doesn't bow before their whims. The feelings of hatred against the wretches who are under their orders and who they command revolver in hand, of stupid and cowardly

vengeance to be satisfied at whatever cost, end up by stifling any other sentiment in them. The man is annihilated and replaced by the wild beast. Nine-tenths of them are Corsican.

Among the officers some of them, like their non-coms – who are just as bad as them – asked to leave their regiments to go to the disciplinary companies. Others were sent there as a disciplinary measure. The latter, having no other plan than that of trying to return within the framework of the regular army, generally demonstrate an excessive zeal, which is manifested by acts of excessive severity. Most of the time they avoid compromising themselves directly. Why should they? Don't they always have sergeants at hand ready to satisfy their hatreds and rancor? These bulldogs know so well how to transform themselves into lapdogs and be as degraded and base before their superiors as they are arrogant and insolent vis-à-vis their inferiors.

This whole society lives – if you can call this living – under the rule of the grand pontiff: the captain. And he's a bizarre being, half priest half bandit; a murderer mixed with a bit of Tartuffe. A nose that resembles a vulture's beak, a mustache like King Victor-Emmanuel, eyes of a cockroach and chin of a canon. He has the air of a murderous beadle who points to heaven with his left hand and lays you flat with the holy water sprinkler in his right hand. He wears his kepi on a slant, just as Captain Fracasse must have worn his felt hat, and he twiddles his thumbs when he speaks to you the same way that religious bigots do after lunch. When he has something nasty to say he knows as nobody else does how to tangle it up with honeyed phrases freshly laid by a sacristan. "Family," "Religion" endlessly appear in his speeches, where he promises to send us before the military tribunal for the least peccadillo. He looks like he's giving a man absolution when he tosses him in prison, and when he orders him placed in irons appears to be offering him papal benediction. He traffics in us as if we were simple Negroes. For his own benefit he sells our labor to the country's merchants so we can build houses using – of course – government materials. He could care less what we think of this. He offers the God of peace and charity the hatred and contempt he inspires in the unfortunates he has under his orders. In fact, he consorts as little as possible with them, looking upon them as serfs to be made to labor at will and from whom he must simply seek to draw all he can, all the while maintaining the air of an unapproachable pontiff. He is wicked, and it's easy to see why. A man who still has any feeling of humanity would not ask to fulfill such a function. Unscrupulous too, despite his church warden act. Any action is good, as long as it fills his pockets. He has nothing against an act of cruelty when he has nothing better to do. Otherwise he prefers some swindle, some skullduggery that will allow him to fill his purse at our expense. If he would have been an executioner if he were to spot a ten cent coin on the platform of the guillotine at the moment the blade fell he would have left the patient's neck in the opening and would have picked up the coin before pulling the string.

"You're wrong to carry on like that against them," Queslier said to me in the evening, when I shared my bitter reflections with him. "It's not individuals you should attack, it's the system."

He's known the system for a long time, this worker who, at best, knows what is taught in elementary school, but who learned how to think and see things clearly at the school of hard knocks. He explained to me, verse by verse, the text of that gospel which, in my bourgeois disdain, I had barely browsed through and whose chapters are written with the tears and blood of the Suffering, and sometimes with their bile.

I today understand many things that I couldn't explain yesterday.

I know that the disciplinary companies and the public workshops are the immediate and necessary consequence of permanent armies. I know why an enormous punishment is suspended

over the head of the unruly soldier and why, when he is skillful enough to avoid them, when the ignoble claw of military justice is unable to grasp him, instead of beating him with whips or branding him – which was once done – he is sent to Biribi, which is worse. I know why bourgeois society, in order to safeguard its interests, makes a soldier of the citizen, then makes a prisoner of the soldier the day he seeks to shake off the yoke of the crushing discipline that humiliates and degrades him. It's because, like all usurping societies, it needs to support its domination with terror, because it needs to be feared at the risk of losing its prestige and collapsing.

What it wants at whatever price is passive and blind obedience, complete mindlessness, limitless degradation, the obedience of the machine to the mechanic, the dog's submission before the circus performer's wand. Take a man; make him surrender his free will, his freedom, his conscience, and you will have a soldier. Today, at the end of the nineteenth century, whatever might be said, there is as much difference between these two words, soldier and citizen, as there was between the words *milites* and *quirites* at the time of Caesar.

And this can be easily understood. The army is the cornerstone of the current social construct. It is force sanctioning force's conquests. It's the barrier raised less against any foreigner's attempts at invasion than against the demands of citizens. Soldiers, these sons of the people armed against their fathers, are nothing but gendarmes in disguise. Instead of blue pants they wear red ones; this is the only difference. The goal of their chiefs, those pimps of the state, is literally to wring from them "absolute obedience and submission at every moment; discipline being the principle force of armies."

But discipline, it has been said, *is fear*. The soldier must be more frightened of what is behind him than of what is before him. He must be more afraid of the execution squad than of the enemy he must combat.

It is fear. The soldier must be afraid of his chiefs. He is prohibited from rising in indignation when he sees villainies and injustices committed that turn your stomach. He is forbidden the right to speak or even think, his chiefs alone having the right to do so for him. If he laughs, if he is indignant, if he speaks, if he thinks, if he is not afraid, then woe on him! He is undisciplined and must be disciplined. He is a rebel: crush him. Set an example for the others! To the penal colonies! To Biribi!

Yes, I know all of this now. I feel it, I suddenly felt it, so suddenly that I am troubled. I dare not fill the excavation into which the shaky scaffolding of my old bourgeois ideas has crumbled with new beliefs. I am a convert, but I am not convinced.

"It's the system that must be attacked," Queslier repeats, "nothing but the system. You see, when the people learn what permanent armies are, when it learns that it is in their interest to tear down this institution that drains it, when it will understand that those who live on the military form only a caste that is built on prejudices and selfish interests, it won't last long. Fifteen minutes of reflection and an hour of anger..."

I nod my head. I think that in order to tear off the gates of social hell anger isn't enough. It is faith that is needed.

"So you don't think the people have faith? You don't believe in the people?"

Not really. I'm afraid the much water will pass under the bridge before they decide to no longer adore the idols that drink their blood and sweat. And I'm afraid that their admiration and respect will for a long time still be directed at the plumed, colorful, medal-covered being – thug, condottiere, mercenary or soldier – at the Man in Arms, and who today, by the force of circumstances, is becoming the social pimp.

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