

Before the Burial

Octave Mirbeau

1887

Mr. Poivret got down from his wagon in front of the shop owned by his son-in-law Pierre Gasselin, tied the horse to a thick iron ring and, after three times checking the tightness of the tether's knot, he entered the butcher shop cracking his horse-whip.

"Anyone there?" he yelled.

A dog, sleeping with its body stretched across a sunny patch of floor, got up with a low groan and then laid itself out a little farther out of the way. The store was deserted, and since it was Thursday, the meat rack was pretty close to empty. A quarter of nearly black beef lay on the block, covered with flies, and a lamb's heart, split down the middle, was hanging from the ceiling on one of the movable hooks. In a corner, in the bottom of a copper basin, some bloody bones and heaps of yellowing grease were beginning to spoil. From that direction an odor rose up: that weakening smell of death that sickens the stomach in a hospital or at a mass grave.

"Anybody home?" repeated Poivret. "Hey, Gasselin! Where are you?"

Gasselin came out of the Café Gadaud, located just across the street from his shop. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, relit his pipe, and rushed over saying "Here I am! Here I am!"

He was without a hat, his chubby face all red and clean shaven and his sleeves rolled up almost to the elbows. His white cloth apron, stained by a constellation of red splotches, covered him from the blue scarf loosely wrapped around his neck almost to his wooden clogs. The tops of his feet were bare, and a sharpening rod danced along his left leg at the end of a steel chain. He walked up to his father-in-law and offered his hand.

"You're lookin' good —how are you?"

"Not bad, my boy," said the older man, "not bad at all." "Can I get some oats for your horse?"

"Hell no! He ate and drank this morning. I'm coming from the Chassant fair, my boy!"

"Now that's a nice fair!" Gasselin declared.

Poivret nodded his head and answered tersely. "Yeah, yeah. Not so good, not so bad, either. The prices are decent." Changing his tone, he said, "Little Auguste gave me the bad news when I got to Mansonniere."

"Yep..." chirped Gasselin. "Yes indeed!"

"Anyhow, I've gotten unhitched, I've given only four quarts of oats to my horse, and here I am, finally."

"You wanna go freshen up?" asked Pierre Gasselin.

“Well, I can’t say no to that. My mouth feels like an oven. Anyway, it’s no joke, then? She’s up’n died, your wife?”

The butcher took his pipe and shook out the ashes on the point of one of his clogs. “She’s really dead,” he said. “Last night at the stroke of ten. Yeah, or maybe ten-thirty. Well, around there somewhere —whatever!”

“Last night?” asked Poivret, rocking his head from side to side. “Well, well, well! Did you see it? What did she catch? Was it a case of rabies, or blood poisoning?”

“It wasn’t blood poisoning, Mr. P, and not an infection either,” explained Gasselin. “It was a stomach thing. Her stomach puffed out. But I mean way out! And she cried and cried. Jeez, the way she cried! Worse yet, now she’s dead. Can you believe it? But there was something else I was thinkin’...”

“What was that, my boy?”

“Oh, well, here it is. Fifteen days ago, or maybe twelve, maybe more, maybe less —well let’s say fifteen days ago, your daughter was givin’ me some shit. I think she called me a pig and a drunk because of a party I had with the Bacoup boys and the Maute boys. Anyway, I told her to shut up —but gently, without anger. With love, actually! But sure enough, she plagued me with more bullshit, only worse this time! The really bad thing was that I gave her a good smack, and a kick in the gut. But hey, look, Mr. P, I was only foolin’ around. I didn’t mean any harm. I wouldn’t hurt her. Anyway, where was I? The next morning, she was complaining, ‘I don’t know what’s in my stomach. There’s gotta be something in my stomach. An animal —a big animal that’s eating me alive!’ This didn’t stop her from taking care of the customers, though. Then, the day before yesterday, it came back, only worse. She was layin’ down, and she’d puffed up! And she howled and screamed like a banshee! Finally, she was dead! I’ll be damned, but I’d never believe that a little kick in the gut, in fun like that, not in anger, could kill a woman just like that.”

Poivret scratched the back of his neck and repeated, in a dreamy voice, “Well, well, well. That’s the way it goes!” And he went on with a sorrowful, resigned air, “Dust into dust. It’s like her mother Mrs. Poivret, my late wife. She was dead in the wink of an eye! The tree hit her on the back of the head. You know the one —the big walnut that’s sacred to the farm?”

“Yes, of course!” groaned Gasselin. “Maybe you wanna take a look at your daughter? She’s upstairs, Mr. P.”

“It’s all the same to me,” Poivret replied. “Let’s go and see her!” And the two of them went through the back of the shop, where they climbed a hidden staircase and halted at the top, in front of a door that lay ajar.

The father-in-law said to his son-in-law, “You go in!” “No, you go in, Mr. P!”

“No, no, my boy. You first.”

They entered the bedroom, walking on tiptoe. Poivret had removed his hat and was respectfully turning it in his hand. His little eyes had become large and round. He squeezed his mouth shut into two folding creases that gave his appearance a singular expression of comic fright and compressed emotion. He looked around him.

The figure of a woman was lying on the bed with the head thrown back, the features frightfully drawn, the complexion leaden, and the body rigid under a cloth that molded itself around the projecting parts and the form of the cadaver. Her hands, which lay crossed over her chest, held a crucifix. Near the bed an old woman sat up and prayed, and near her, on a lace covered table, two candles burned, flanking a larger crucifix with their sad glow. An “aspergeoir” made of birch twigs soaked in a reddish clay pot of holy water.

Mr. Poivret crossed himself and approached the bed. For a few minutes he observed his daughter, sometimes leaning over as though he would embrace her, and then suddenly righting himself, overcome by a vague fear that he would have been unable to explain. Finally, he placed his fat, knotty hand on the hand of the dead woman, but immediately retrieved it and made a pained grimace, as a man does when he's been burned by a hot iron. He went to rejoin his son-in-law, who was lingering in the middle of the room, and told him in a deep voice:

"She sure is dead! And she's cold —I'll be damned if she ain't cold!" Going back down the stairs, pale and embarrassed, they were troubled, in spite of themselves, by the grand mystery of death, about which they understood nothing.

"Damned if she ain't cold!" he repeated, the rhythm of his exclamation followed the muffled sound of his clogs on the stairs.

"And yellow, huh? Wasn't she yellow?" Gasselin responded. In the shop, the two men looked at each other, and the son-in-law asked, "Maybe you'd like a drink to help you calm down?"

"Sure! I sure would!" The father-in-law thanked him. "And to think that not five days ago, she was as fit as a fiddle. Well! Get a load of that!"

They slowly crossed the street, with Poivret muttering, "You've gotta know she was cold!" and Gasselin countering, "And yellow, eh, Mr. P?" At a table in the café, with a bottle of wine between them, they were silent at first. Poivret refilled the glasses, pouring from high in the air.

"To your health," he said.

"And to yours, sir," replied Gasselin.

Afterwards, they chatted about the price of meat, the quality of various pastures, and the Chassant fair. Poivret complained that we weren't selling as much cattle as we used to.

"If it weren't for the Spaniards and the Americans buying our stock, what would we be selling?"

When they got up after two bottles, they were feeling much better. Poivret said to Gasselin, "We're not done yet, my boy. When do we bury her?"

"Oh, yeah. That's another problem. Tomorrow, Friday? Beats me!"

The father-in-law approved. "Good. All right, then."

"Wait... I can't bury her tomorrow!" "Nope! Sure can't!"

"Saturday's the market!"

"Okay, fine!"

"And I can't let my meat spoil."

"Nope. No way."

"It's pretty embarrassing, Mr. P."

There were a few minutes of silence. Mr. Poivret thought about it carefully. Finally, in a confidential tone, he said carefully, "I was going to say... it's just that, well, she'll spoil too, the poor girl."

"For sure! Definitely!"

"And that would make all the meat go bad!"

"Damned right! It's true! So what're we gonna do, Mr. P? Huh? Whatta we do?"

Poivret's face took on a grave expression as he gave it some more thought, cradling his chin in his palm. Finally he made a wide sweep of his hand and proposed:

"Let's crack open another bottle."

THE END

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Octave Mirbeau
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