

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

I—THE WATERS OF NANTERRE¹

MME DE CRÉQUY

MADAME DE MARSAN, Princess of Lorraine, with whom I often went on little pilgrimages, proposed that we should take the waters at Nanterre, at her patron saint's well. So we set out one day in the gilded coach, part of the time saying paternosters and the rest of it amusing ourselves with what was before us. Because, so she said, you must not wipe the lip of the cup which is chained to the parapet and which you have to drink from; and above all you must not leave a drop although it holds at least half a pint. I cried out at this but the good Princess underlined the duty we owed not to scandalize simple people and in the end I agreed to do as she asked.

I must tell you that the water in question is a sovereign remedy for the eyes, from which neither of us suffered. But when we got within sight of the place we found it surrounded by so many peasants and farm people that we could not get near. As a result we left the coach and with a charming modesty stood away to one side.

We then saw, guess who, coming up to make their devotions? No less a person than Madame du Deffand, who was a rabid atheist, and for whom the Chevalier de Pont-de-Vesle, assisted by several servants, was forcing a way through. She was practically blind at that time, as was also her companion, and because of this the water, for them, was not merely a precaution as it was for us. But we had the satisfaction of watching them drink a full cup each. We did not flatter ourselves that these two old people, who had lived together in sin for years, would boast afterwards to their agnostic friends of what they had done, but we determined to say nothing of it ourselves. The last thing in the world we wished was to promote a story which might encourage jokes about such a subject.

¹From the *Souvenirs de Madame de Créquy* (1710–1800) to her infant grandson Tancred Raoul de Créquy, Prince de Montlaur. Translated from the French by Henry Green.

It was at this moment that Madame de Marsan's servants, who were wearing the livery of Lorraine and of Jerusalem, became highly indignant at our humility. They suddenly discovered that they were shocked to see Madame du Deffand precede us. The Princess's first coachman suggested that a way should be made for us through the rabble. We replied that we had no house work nor anything to do in the vineyards as had all these good people crowding round the well, and we ordered him and those under him to let us be.

This very much upset the servants, so much so that at one moment I almost thought they were going to disobey the Princess, their mistress. And this is where I must tell you about Madame de Marsan's first coachman.

The fact is the man wholly disliked me, dating from the time some years previously when coming to me for a place, he had refused to join my household.

'Who was your last employer?' I asked him, naturally enough at this disastrous interview.

'Madame, I was with the Abbot Duke de Biron, but he has gone to meet his Maker.'

'If that man ever got before the Eternal Father he didn't stay there long,' I could not help remarking half under my breath. This seemed to annoy the coachman. He told me he was of gentle birth, as were most of the Duke's servants. I replied that there was nothing beneath him in wearing the Créquy livery, and suggested he should go upstairs to settle his wages with my secretary.

'But, Madame,' he said, 'before engaging myself in your service I must know whom you give way to.'

'To everyone! I give way to everyone except in the streets and the courtyards at Versailles.'

'But surely Madame, you would never expect your first coachman to give way in Paris to the wives of Cabinet Ministers?'

'Certainly. And all the more so because I dine every Thursday in the district where these people live.'

'But really Madame is never going to give way to the wife of a Chancellor of the Exchequer? Why, if one of his servants had anything to say I'd sort him out with my whip.'

'Oh, well, those people usually know whose livery it is they have to deal with, but in any case I do not for a moment intend to knock passers-by over or endanger my carriages just to keep up a

position *vis-à-vis* the middle classes, nor even to injure my horses.'

'It's quite right that Madame has only twelve carriage horses in her stables, and besides I am not accustomed to make way except before the Royal Princes. As a result I'm afraid I shall not give you satisfaction, Madame,' and he went off perfectly furious. Madame de Marsan had taken him on, and it was he who was now urging the coachmen to revolt, saying that we were dishonouring them. What particularly exasperated him it seemed was that de Pont-de-Vesle's servants had taken up a position in front; and, so he said with scorn, the gentleman was only a *bourgeois*.

Monsieur Girard was the name this proud coachman went by, and it is worth noting that thirty years later, at the time of the Revolution it was Citizen Girard, the same man, then known as one of the most enthusiastic revolutionaries as well as one of their best speakers, who was finally guillotined by his friends for being an Orleanist, or Federalist, I forget which.

While he sat there, growing old without knowing it for a glorious destiny, and while he egged our servants on to disobey us as he held the reins high above the seven-windowed golden coach, we managed to make our way at last up to the well, and there I drank my draught of the water in peace of mind and in submission. Then we went to render thanks in the parish church in which lie the relics of the Saint for, as you will have guessed, this was the real object of our little pilgrimage. Accordingly we made our way to the church on foot with, on my part, that sentiment of confidence and tenderness which all my life I have felt for the Patroness of Paris.

But when we tried to get in, the church was so full to overflowing that we sent for the sacristans to ask if we might not be allowed to take our places in the private chapel where the relics are.

'No one is permitted to enter the chapel any more. We have been forbidden to let ladies from the Royal Court go anywhere near the relics. You must surely know that Madame de Créquy last year stole a piece of the True Cross.'

'Madame de Créquy, you say?'

'And no other. She stole a piece of the True Cross from off the altar.'

I burst out laughing while Madame de Marsan was asking how they knew it had been me.

'There was no mistaking her, Madame,' they replied. 'She

came in her carriage with six horses, her servants were wearing the yellow livery with red braid; two other servants from Paris were in the church, and they told us who it was. She was at least twice the size of either of you ladies.'

'You see if I'm not right,' Madame de Marsan said to me in a low voice. 'It will be Madame the Marshal de Noailles, she is always doing it.' This was the more likely in that the liveries of our two houses were the same.

Of course Madame de Noailles was insane, and certain steps had to be taken not long after to restrain her, steps in which your old grandmother took a prominent part. Nevertheless that was the end of our little pilgrimage. But while I am on the subject I must tell you one last story of mistaken identity.

On a Sunday evening in Paris I was outside the church of Saint-Sulpice waiting for one of the attendants whom my servants had gone to fetch to open the chapel for me, and conduct me through the crowd. There I was sitting in my carriage when a young priest came to the door. He was very thin and very pale, and his hands were so dirty and he was in such rags that I could almost have taken him for a beggar. He held a piece of paper, which he gave me, and which said he was from the late Duchess of Orleans, wife of the Regent. He went on to speak of the admirable way she had died, according to the rites of the Church. He used such unpleasant expressions that I had no difficulty in recognizing that he was one of that hateful sect of Jansenists which had got hold of the Duchess as she lay dying.

This piece of paper, he said, contained a legacy from the Duchess, which he then qualified as an act of conscience on her death bed. It was no more and no less than a recipe for making red cabbage soup. Take two handfuls of Reinette apples, it said, an onion stuffed with cloves, and two glasses of red wine to each average-sized red cabbage. 'I wanted to send you this as I had so often promised to do,' the Duchess had written in her own hand on the other side, 'and I do so now as a mark of my full and sincere reconciliation with the Faith.'

As I was reading this the sacristan was waiting for me to leave the carriage, and my servants were ready to escort me with my cassock, the bag with my prayer books, and the cushions which were emblazoned with my arms, but no more extravagantly than was the custom at that time. All this upset the young priest, who

began to call on me to show a more christian humility and to flee Satan, on account of my velvet bag with gold thread embroidery. 'Vain sinner, learn the way of God,' he wound up.

'Father,' I said, 'first things first. Now who do you think I am?' (For I had read the recipe.) 'Who do you think, tell me? First of all I am not Madame de Mouchy, and I would advise you another time to take greater care when you deliver the last wishes of the dying. Here it is back so that you can give it to Madame de Mouchy, who is exceedingly greedy. Also I shall never forget what a dying woman's conscience pricked her to do under your ministrations, because I am very fond of red cabbage, Father, and have always wanted this recipe.'

At this moment Françoise de Chauvelin, a distant cousin of mine, came up.

'Good heavens,' she said, 'what on earth are you doing talking with my idiot of a nephew?'

'Watch your step as you go into the House of God,' he cried out, most unpleasantly. Then he turned to the servant who was carrying Madame de Chauvelin's bag and her train. 'Don't you tremble at what you are about to do in the Presence of God,' he shouted, and he struck the train out of the man's hands with one blow of his fist. It fell in the dust on the church steps.

'The madman,' she said. 'Does he want me to drag my dress through all this filth so that I'll get as dirty as he is?'

'Now then, now then,' her servants said to him, very indignant at the way he had spoken to their mistress. Particularly the first coachman, who went on, red with fury, 'if it wasn't that I'd be excommunicated, seeing that you're in holy orders, I'd break every bone in your body for speaking to Madame as you've just done.'

You should know, because you are too young to remember, that Madame de Mouchy was Marguerite-Eugénie de Laval, a lady in waiting to the Regent's daughter, the Duchess de Berry. It was not so extraordinary, therefore, that the Berry's mother should think of her at the last, even if only for a recipe, although it could not, at such a moment, speak to the credit of Madame de Chauvelin's nephew. But how he could ever mistake me for a Laval passes all understanding.

II—ECSTASY

GEORGE SAND

GEORGE SAND's *Journal Intime*, from which this passage is translated, was shown by her only to one or two friends, and was published by her grand-daughter in 1926 to vindicate her memory. The episode which Sand describes occurred on 24 December 1840 (not 1839, which date Sand must have added later in error) and concerns the Polish poet Mickiewicz (1798–1855) who has been regarded as second only to Pushkin among Slavonic poets. Other versions of what occurred can be found in Mickiewicz's biography and in the letters of Slowacki, the poet whose remarks provoked him. (See Karénin, George Sand, III, 201.)

Mickiewicz had a remarkable gift of poetic improvisation and he gave the title 'Improvisation' to the poem in which he dramatizes his own experience of poetic inspiration, the centrepiece of the third part of *Dziady* (The Ancestors). Long years of distress proved too much for his intense nature. Shortly after this episode the 'high sickness of the mind' which Sand describes degenerated into definite mental instability touched with religious mania. He recovered, but his poetic gift had gone.

Twenty years later George Sand recorded her view that it is not in ecstasy that man obtains the true vision of the divine.

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Paris, Rue Pigalle 16.

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Something happened recently which is rather strange at the present time. At a reunion of Polish emigrés a certain poet who is said to be rather mediocre and was a little jealous, recited a poem addressed to Mickiewicz in which, amidst lavish praises, he complained of the superiority of this great poet with a frank vexation which was not in bad taste. It was obviously at once homage and reproach. But the sombre Mickiewicz, insensible to both, rose and improvised a reply, or rather a speech in verse, which had a prodigious effect. No one can say exactly what happened; each of those present has retained a different memory of it. Some say he spoke for five minutes, others for an hour. It is clear that he spoke to them so finely and that he said such beautiful things, that they all fell into a kind of delirium. One heard nothing but cries and sobs; some had nervous hysterics, others couldn't sleep that night. Count Plater was in such an