IMP. EMILE LEVY R. RAMEAU, 4, PARIS (1892)

PHILIBERT AUDEBRAND

P.-J. PROUDHON

AND

THE HORSEWOMAN OF THE HIPPODROME

SCENES FROM THE LITERARY LIFE

Here is one of the most curious episodes of the literary life of the nineteenth century.

About fifteen years ago, when one could still hear the last echoes of the February revolution, P.-J. Proudhon was indisputably one of the most famous personalities of the time. We recall his articles in the papers, the most brilliant that had appeared in the French press since the death of Armand Carrel; we read his books, which provided us with so much nourishing substance; we especially sought to know the private man, whose features had been so altered in caricature, theater and nonsense From this resulted a bizarre fact: almost every day P.-J. Proudhon received ten or twelve letters asking for an autograph, five or six lines of his writing. Sometimes he responded affirmatively, and sometimes he formulated a very flat refusal in a word or even by silence. We have not forgotten that a Society of literary men, occupied with making an Album in which should figure the most glorious names of the day, asked the publicist to at least send them his signature. "Someone tell these gentlemen that I am not a public writer," he responded, and, thus, the author of the *Confessions of a Revolutionary* passed for

the most ill-mannered bear that ever descended from the peaks of the Jura. We are not, however, hard-pressed to cite other occasions when the canny publicist knew how to show more kindness.

Such would have been, for example, the affair that led to a correspondence between him and a horsewoman at the Hippodrome.

In 1856, about six months after the founding of the *Gazette de Paris*, a literary review of which I was the editor-in-chief, a packet was brought to me, sealed with aristocratic arms on red wax. After reading the communication, I did not hesitate to send its contents to the printers. You will see, in reading what follows, that no one else would have hesitated to do what I did. But to explain the situation of the journal and to cover its liabilities, I preceded the insertion of the letter with the following:

"There are not three lines that do not tell a story," said the president of Brosses. — One of our subscribers sent us the following letter in these flattering terms, and we would quite willingly comply with his desire."

Then followed the letter from the subscriber.

"Champrosay, August 11, 1856. — Monsieur, I send you, — as a testimony of my sympathy for your *Gazette de Paris*, — the perfectly literal copy of a curious letter, addressed by Mr. Proudhon to a former horsewoman at the Hippodrome, who had asked of the famous writer some advice on returning to the path of virtue, as Joseph Prudhomme put it. — Mr. Proudhon's correspondent is my country neighbor at Champrosay, and has declared to me that she wrote to the author of the *Memoir on Property* in a bout of melancholy and discouragement, — after supper. — What have we become, alas! if the riders of the Hippodrome now go sad to their *supper!*

"Gabriel Vicaire."

Who was Mr. Gabriel Vicaire? I only know because I had received from him, two years previously, a letter he sent me in response to an article on the *Musketeer*, of Alexander Dumas, containing a eulogy of Lamartine signed with my name. In spite of a most urgent invitation, I had neglected to respond to this unknown correspondent, not fully realizing the insistence he put on having my meager prose; but he did not bear any hard feelings towards me, as one can see. — Moreover, the new communication that he made being a very lovely bit of style employed in the service of a highly moral idea, there was no reason not to publish it.

Thus, in its number for August 24, the *Gazette de Paris* inserted the letter of P.-J. Proudhon to the horsewoman of the Hippodrome. — That piece has already acquired all the authority of a historical monument.

Here it is in its native originality:

"July 13, 56.

"Madame,

"I am not too sure what to think of your original letter. Was it a bout of mad that which suggested to you the idea of trying the wisdom of a poor family man far below his reputation; or else one of those insurmountable lassitudes that make up the bitter compensation of the intoxications of your condition? I really do not know how to judge the half-desolate, half-ironic tone of your letter, and I know too little of the world in which you have lived to know what passes through the brain of a former Hippodrome rider.

"In that uncertainty, I take the part, madame, to do as you do; I will respond to your questions as if they were serious, and I will loosen the bridle of the pen a bit, as if you would have more urge to laugh than to be converted.

“Let us first lay down some principles.

“You do not believe, you say, in the virtue of men, any more than you believe in the virtue of women.

“I am not surprised given the life that you have led. But a truce on misanthropy as well as rigorism; it is with virtue, madame, as with health. Virtue is itself only, to my thinking, the health of our heart, as health is the virtue of our body. How many truly healthy subjects are there, do you think, among a hundred individuals taken at random? Not five, and perhaps not three; and the proof is that there are very few people who die of old age after having spent their lives without illness. The *insanity* of the body, such is the common condition of humanity today, despite the hundred thousand so-called healthy conscripts that our review councils take each year, despite this multitude of pretty women who fill our cities and countrysides.

“Well! Madame, Does this rarity of perfect health make you declaim against health? Do you claim that illness is our natural and normal state? Do you suspect the small number of those who are doing well to be hypocrites? And do you conclude that we must abandon ourselves to the hazards of heat, cold, humidity and disordered eating?

“No, certainly; on the contrary, something tells us that health is the law of living beings! That it is health that forms the basis of our life; that when we have lost it, we must return to it or stupidly let ourselves die of inertia and inanition.

“So it is with virtue; there is a bit everywhere, but it is complete almost nowhere. I don't know, madame, who shaped your ideas about virtue; you must have received them, as a young girl, in some convent. But just as there is still life and health in you, even vigor (and your letter overflows with it); in the same way, I dare to swear, there is virtue in you: only sorrow, the rancor of your weaknesses, the humiliation of your miscalculations prevent you from seeing it.

“Let us leave aside the Agneses and the Madeleines, these types of innocence and repentance; there is virtue in you, I tell you, and I have an excellent reason for affirming it, it is your own testimony, it is your deep desire to have even more virtue, like a convalescent who aspires to perfect health.

“This first principle will not seem too distressing to you, I think. Here is another one to which I also draw your attention.

“It is a fact that the animals, — I am not making a comparison, rest assured, — that the animals, I say, do not know boredom, or disgust, or satiety, or despair, or any of those moral illnesses that follow the loss of moral health, that is to say, if you will allow me to use the word now, of virtue.

“The reason is that animals, infinitely less passionate than men, obeying instinct and its inflexible laws, are not, so to speak, exposed to losing this balance, this health of the soul without which we men cannot live. On this side, the existence of animals is protected by their very animality; I am not saying that they are pure machines, but I am saying, in the moral sense, from the point of view of this higher life that characterizes us, that they truly have no soul.

“Where am I going with this observation from natural history? Here: Nature is full of analogies; like animals, people occupied with serious things, even trivial ones, — for what the common man calls serious, is for artists only trivial, — these people, I say, plowmen, craftsmen, scientists, civil servants, etc., etc., do not know boredom, or at least know it very little. They only experience it, and with it disgust, satiety, dejection, all these symptoms that characterize advanced corruption in a man, when they happen to leave their occupations, to indulge in idleness, in pleasure, in debauchery. “

Are these people beasts, and you, madame, and your companions from the theater and the Hippodrome, and the lazy

people who *revel* their lives with you, are you by chance noble, privileged creatures, kings and the queens of creation?...

"I challenge you to answer me in the affirmative: you can imagine what my response could be.

"Thus, this is what is established: the people who labor, study, engage in business, the souls who struggle, are little or not at all subject to boredom and the vices that generate it; on the contrary, people who play, who have fun, who stroll, who frolic, who make love, who dream, who *live*, who eat, who dance and who sing; poets, artists, all of the literary bohemia, I would also say church people and even the Trappists, this entire supposedly superior world is irremissibly given over to debauchery, disgust, shame worse than death.

"A little more patience, madam, I will conclude.

"I find in your letter a curious sentence that describes you completely: 'Coming from am honorable family, I could, like many others, have married a brave bourgeois man, had children, etc. But bah! I feared the troubles of such an uneventful existence, and I threw myself headlong into the hazards of a day-to-day existence!'

"You have made a huge mistake there, madame; but as it is not entirely your fault, the evil is not entirely without remedy either.

"All your disappointments have their primary cause in a noble feeling of human dignity, a feeling that should reconcile you with yourself and restore your courage. You have to the highest degree the awareness of liberty and the horror of this monotony, of this servitude which nature imposes on us, and which is summed up in this word: LABOR. Here, madam, believe me, I am not being ironic. I blame you for having ignored the law of labor which would have kept you in the path of your father; but I praise you for having understood, although in a confused way, that man, while submitting to the law of labor, must

constantly combat the trivialities of existence. Your misfortune was to separate in thought these two things: LABOR and LIBERTY, — LABOR and ART, — LABOR and LOVE. — You said to yourself: I will leave aside this laborious servitude and all this triviality, all this conventionality of common life, and I will devote myself exclusively to liberty, to art, to love. And you have become a free woman, artistic, in love, a fanciful and passionate being, pushing fantasy to the point of exhaustion...

"The result is known to you. By following only the beautiful and the ideal, you have arrived at the gross and the ignoble; from the free person that you were, you made yourself a slave, and the pleasures of vanity, and those of art, and those of love, no longer being supported by anything real, serious, living, strong, have left you with nothing but defilement, emptiness, degradation.

"What to do at this hour? you ask me.

"Here, Madam, I can no more convince you either by reasoning or by your own experience, since you have placed yourself outside the conditions of normal life. I can only tell you the truth of what I am going to say to you. You will follow my advice or you will disdain it: life or death depends on you, and what is more, as I told you, honor or infamy.

"You are twenty-eight years old, the first period of your youth has passed; you have the second left: twelve years of the average age of a woman, twenty-eight to forty. It is still a future.

"First break with every kind of love. The first thing you have to do is to learn to possess yourself, and, unfortunately, until now you have only been the slave of others! It will cost you in the beginning, and you must expect it; but if the struggle is painful, the triumph will be sweet to you. To *possess* yourself, you hear; to be freed, ennobled in your body and in your heart, to govern your own senses, this is what we call *chastity*. You are no longer a virgin, so be it; the loss can be repaired; you can still be chaste.

"At least two years of this regime are necessary for you. The temptations will be strong: those who, having known you, will see you change your life, those who, knowing of you only your new life, will hear of your past; everyone will find it exciting to repeat your conquest, and will do everything possible to bring you back under the yoke. Do not weaken, or all is lost. Despise those who ridicule you: it cannot escape you, however little you know the hearts of men, that spite will have more part in their sarcasm than the zeal for virtue. A horsewoman leaves her lovers before her lovers leave her; this is unforgivable! With absolute abstinence from love, I prescribe to you a sober and laborious life. Give nothing to sensuality, and sometimes even eat meagerly. This is what the priests call *mortification;* and I recommend it to you, not because there is any magical virtue in this regime, but because it trains you little by little to dominate nature, and because it spiritualizes, so to speak, your being.

"You do not tell me what your current means of existence are; but whatever they are, you must add to them, develop them, apply them by choosing a profession, by embracing a career.

"You have, to a large extent, intelligence, even wit, impeccable spelling, style, a pretty hand; I am not talking about your other talents, which are unknown to me. You lack nothing, and you can still distinguish yourself in serious life, as much and more than you ever did on the boards.

"Imagine that you are in society like Robinson on his island, alone, with the few resources that fortune has left you. You must live, and if life is already assured to you, you must expand and elevate this life more and more. Would you have died cowardly in Robinson's place, by the sea, instead of working as he did for twenty-five years? Well! You are better than Robinson, and you can do better than him.

"Eliminate novels and verses from your reading. Your imagination calls for something more strengthening and purer.

"You have history, travel, geography, science; go as far as philosophy, if you like.

"In short, while remaining what nature made you, an artist, labor, keep busy, undertake, and carrying your talent as an artist to your new life, constantly ennoble your work and your enterprises. You don't like home economics! That is because you only saw the grit and the smoke. It takes a lot of talent, you know, for a woman to make a painting and a landscape out of her apartment. And yet this is where they must all tend: pots, pans, furniture, are they more disgusting to touch than paints and brushes?

"— And after, will you say to me me, what is the goal, the end of all this? — After, madam? You must first take my word for it, since you took me for your doctor; start the treatment and follow it with resolution, and when your recovery is advanced, I will tell you what to do. I will show you the higher goal of universal life, a goal to which your happiness will be to have contributed with all your strength.

"I greet you, Madam, with esteem and affection.

P.-J. Proudhon."

The appearance of this letter would not take long to take on the proportions of an event. Independently of the very legitimate interest that followed everything that P.-J. Proudhon published, the epistle to the horsewoman became a precious object from the point of view of both content and form. Only a wise man can give such good advice to a lost woman. Only a Voltaire could write with this marvelous clarity. The *Gazette de Paris,* virtually ignored before this publication, suddenly became one of the most beloved literary journals. This letter was, the next day, reproduced by the *Presse*, and, the day after, by all the organs of public opinion in France. Not one departmental newspaper has exempted itself from reprinting it. This success was European

after a week, that is to say (for those who do not understand the ellipses) that this address by the publicist to a sinner of the day was translated into English, German, Spanish, Russian. After three months, it returned to us from South America, in a newspaper in Havana.

A phrase was said, in the language of the workshop and café, so well suited to the customs of the time, which I reproduce: "This letter gives a new *gilding* to the celebrity of P.-J. Proudhon."

Leafing through my memories, I found an analogy to this event. Everything wanted the two incidents to be similar. I want to talk about the conversion of a dancer from the old regime and a letter addressed to her by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Here, for example, is what we find in the *Secret Memoirs* of Bachaumont:

"Desiring to be good, even at the Opera, because virtue is everywhere, a young and pretty dancer, Mme. T***, who has just married and retired from the theater, wrote, it is said, to the famous J.-J. Rousseau, some time before the death of this philosopher, and asked him to be kind enough to teach her in what way she should behave in order to lead irreproachable conduct in a sojourn where beauty and virtue are surrounded by a thousand traps. The virtuoso received the following response:

"Mademoiselle,

"One cannot be more surprised than I am to receive a letter dated from the Royal Academy of Music, in which one requests advice from me on how to live well there. Your expressions portray honesty with so much frankness and candor that I will not send you back to receive advice from those who are in the habit of giving it to those who present themselves there. However, I cannot provide you with the precepts that you ask of me. Do not in any way doubt my good will to satisfy you. But I am very embarrassed on my own account, although I am not in

such a slippery career. I am therefore in no position to direct you in the one that you have entered. I only have to advise you to focus on two general principles, which seem to me to be the basis of all our actions, in such a state as destiny has placed us.

"The first is to never deviate from the respect you appear to have for good morals; and, in order to succeed, to avoid the impulses of the heart and the senses, and let extreme prudence be the corrective.

"The second, for which you must feel the full necessity, is to flee, as much as you can, from the society of your companions and their admirers. Nothing dooms so easily as the poison of praise and the contagious air of that place... Cast your eyes around you, and you will notice that those who breathe it, without being on guard against its effect, have a withered complexion and the exterior of broken machines.

"These, mademoiselle, are the only reflections that I urge you to make; as for the rest, you seem to me to be endowed with all the penetration necessary to ward off the inconveniences that resurface at every moment during this stay. Please accept the consideration given to you by

"Your very humble servant,

"JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU."

At the same time, a lawyer at the Paris Court of Appeal, editor of an important *Review*, Mr. Romain Cornut, made another discovery on the same subject, that is to say two other letters from the author of the *Social Contract* to the Opera Dancer. These were not the only reminiscences that P.-J. Proudhon's epistle would give rise to. Thus this curious address by the radical journalist to a horsewoman reminded us of another letter from the same publicist, written in 1850 to a M. B*** junior, of La Ferté-Bernard, a young man of seventeen, who asked his advice on joining a political party. The response of the

witty logician was then printed in the *Journal de Mamers;* but as this newspaper did not circulate outside the locality, it became something new for France. So the *Gazette de Paris* hastened to give it shelter in its columns.[1]

P.-J. Proudhon responds, with his ordinary wisdom, to the younger B••• that labor alone gives us the right to have an opinion; that it is only through long practice of serious things that we *make our own lantern*, as Minister Garât said.

In inserting this new epistle, the *Gazette de Paris* added: "The eighteenth century never tired of the letters of Voltaire; why would the nineteenth century tire of the letters of P.-J. Proudhon?"

Let us quote.

To M. B*** JUNIOR, OF LA FERTÉ-BERNARD.

"*Conciergerie*, March 18, 1850.

"Sir,

"If I had the honor of knowing you, if I could take your words seriously and believe in the sincerity of your request, here is what I would allow myself to answer you:

"You are not seventeen, you say; you want to adopt an opinion and follow a political party, and, to this end, you ask me for advice.

"Well, sir! I would like to warn you that you must not expect such complacency from me; I will do more, I will let you know my reasons.

"It is not up to you, young man, to throw yourself into politics and embrace an opinion, especially if it is contrary to that of your parents; you are not at the age at which a son of a

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[1] The letter to Mr. B"* fils, from La Ferté-Bernard, was communicated to us by Charles Monselet.

family is allowed to follow his inclinations, and far from being able to invoke in your favor the precocity of your young experience, your letter proves to me, precisely, that you do not know not what our statesmen are, and that the best writers are those who have immersed themselves the longest in serious matters before picking up the pen.

"Whether these realities are physics, history, mathematics, industry, commerce or practice, it matters little to me; politics is only the more or less pleasant and fair clothing with which we dress positive ideas, provided by intellectual and moral labor; and you, who are young, you who are entering life, you who have not yet done anything, do you want, as a beginner, to join a party? And it is me you turn to for advice? But know, sir, that before becoming a journalist, I was a printer for fifteen years and a clerk for sixteen years, and that I still find myself, due to the inadequacy of my industrial career, far below my task.

"As for my political opinions, which you claim to be those of Robespierre and Ledru-Rollin, I have only one thing to tell you on this subject, and that is that I am the antipode of Robespierre, and that I have many times fought the tendencies of Ledru-Rollin, or rather that of the men of his party. You can therefore see clearly that you still have to think for a long time before being able to express a conscientious and reasoned judgment on these delicate matters.

"I therefore do not want to give you any advice, because, apart from the fact that you do not have the age or experience necessary for politics, in the event that my advice does not agree with the views and feelings of your father about your person, I could, without wanting to, be guilty of the seduction of a minor, and of a real attack against the laws of the family and paternal authority.

"I conclude by thinking that your letter is only a hoax aimed at me; in this case, sir, the least reparation you owe me is to take

your information about me from a better source; you will discover, without a doubt, that I am pure of all charlatanism, and that my life and my intentions can, so far, defy slander.

"I salute you.

"P.-J. PROUDHON."

This other letter, so wise, was no less successful than the first. People hastened to reproduce it on all sides. Only a few delicate people shook their heads and said: "What does P.-J. Proudhon mean by these words: *mystification directed at me?*" The rest of this work will make us understand the mysterious meaning that the eminent dialectician attached to these words, and why he took so many precautions to respond to the young man from La Ferté-Bernard.

As for himself, P.-J. Proudhon only welcomed the publication of this second letter with anger mixed with fear. Those of his friends who came running to compliment him were very clearly rebuffed.

— Come on then! I was just too mystified by all of this! he cried, — and he turned his back, even on his intimates.

Even better, he sent us, as an expression of his discontent, a sort of protest that appeared the following week (September 7, 1856).

To the Editor of the GAZETTE DE PARIS.

"M. Editor,

"For the time being, it is impossible for me not to protest against the abuse that is being made of my letters in I know not what interest of idle curiosity and reprehensible from every point of view.

"A letter is an act of private life that no one, not even the person to whom it was addressed, has the right to make public

against the wishes of the person who wrote it. Such a publication constitutes a real breach of trust, a violation of honesty.

"I like to believe that, in the large number of letters that I have happened to write, there is none of which I have more to be ashamed of than the two that have just appeared in your newspaper. But it is not the satisfaction of my self-esteem that I must consider here, it is the principles of good faith and public morality. What is happening to me, if I take it seriously, is a real insult, in which you would oblige me, Mr. Editor, in the name of the goodwill that you have always shown me, not to make your more complicit.

"Despite the retreat in which I confine myself, I still receive letters every day from unknown people and on all kinds of subjects. I have the habit of responding to everyone *impromptu*, according to the inspiration of my conscience and my understanding. I have benefited from this system by sometimes giving pleasure to honest people, and what is better, by meriting their esteem. That after that I have happened to be fooled, despite all my presence of mind, by some mystification, this is the inevitable disadvantage of such a correspondence. I accept it wholeheartedly, and I allow indiscreet people to laugh as much as they want at my naivety.

"But you, Mr. Editor, and your colleagues in the periodical press, allow me to remind you, once and for all, of the only conduct that suits you, which is the most severe abstention.

"You will oblige your most devoted

"P.-J. PROUDHON."

Not yet knowing how to guess what the real cause of so much anger was, I made the mistake of taking for myself and for the literary publication that I directed the majority of the reproaches whose expression we have just read. So, in the same

issue where I gave space to the complaint of the eminent publicist, I quickly replied with the following lines:

"If the *Gazette de Paris* could expect a reply from Mr. P.-J. Proudhon, it did not count, I admit, on the strange letter that precedes. When, a fortnight ago, at the request of one of our provincial subscribers, we opened the columns of our newspaper to the first epistle from the author of so many beautiful pages, it was with entirely good, entirely honorable intentions; we had considered, not without reason, this remarkable work as a good fortune; we hastened to admit it, because it contained the very high expression of the most honorable sentiments, and not, certainly, with the aim of provoking in its author the movement of irritation that he has just expressed in such an unexpected way. But Mr. P.-J. Proudhon is not content with blaming; he gets angry, as if it were a big deal; he lavishes big words; he almost launches into the prosopopeias that are familiar to him! For a long time we had known the distinguished writer as a first-rate humorist (the common people would say for an *original.*) Such a jest, completely out of season, cannot be likely to make poor people reconsider the opinion they had in this regard.

"To begin with, Mr. P.-J. Proudhon talks about the abuse that is made of his letters... The word "abuse" is very strong! In reality, I took no other license than to publish the letter to the Horsewoman of the Hippodrome, — the one that has been called throughout the world "the first to the Corinthians." As for the second, no less laudable, addressed to B*** junior, of La Ferté-Bernard, it came to us through a newspaper in the departments, as we have said; it had already been printed in 1850: it had therefore been in the public domain for almost six years, from which its author nor anyone would now have the power to take it back. But, according to Mr. P.-J. Proudhon, his two letters would have been published in an interest of "idle curiosity." Here are

two more offensive words that it would be fair to erase: “When a famous man asks, in writing, a chicken from his cook, it becomes history." Judge what it is like when a famous man writes to an actress! In the times we live in, history comes before all else; history has an interest superior to all the thousand and one considerations of private life. Did I not prove it the other day by looking in the archives of the past for a historical analogy, fitting with the circumstance? A hundred years ago J.-J. Rousseau responded to an Opera dancer, as P.-J. Proudhon responded to a Horsewoman at the Hippodrome. Much better, a correspondent of the Preses, a lawyer journalist, Mr. Romain Cornut, after reading this second pamphlet, discovered and published two other similar letters from the author of the *Social Contract*, but two letters infinitely less beautiful, he recognizes, than that of the author of the *Memoir on Property*. Is there in all this only an “interest of idle curiosity?” P.-J. Proudhon, I am sure, would not dare to maintain it now, he who is a past master in the art of making connections and drawing conclusions from them.

“A little further on, he adds: ‘A letter is an act of private life, which no one, not even the one to whom it was addressed, has the right to publish against the public. will of the one who wrote it.’ He is certainly right a thousand times over, when it concerns a detail of intimate life, an object that relates to the family, an incident that affects business. The current case is quite different. In the two published letters, we find, under the envelope of a very didactic style, principles of morality, a little domestic economics, a little experimental philosophy, and, ultimately, a large dose of pedagogy. These two epistles could just as easily be addressed to an anonymous reader, like Euler's *Letters to a German Princess, on Astronomy*, for example. Admitting that I had launched the work of the astronomer at the four points of the compass rose, I do not see how I would have been guilty of "a violation of honesty.”

"But here, I ask his permission to tell him, the author of *Economic Contradictions* is violently rebelling against himself. Yes, without hyperbole, he refutes everything he has written since he existed. I won't say without doubting it, but very obviously without having seriously thought about it, he erases with the stroke of a pen all the eloquent amplifications that he previously produced in favor of absolute freedom to write. The letters put under a bushel whenever the authors show the desire! Did P.-J. Proudhon think about it? What would become of the truth? Where to find the history? What would we do with justice, of which he is, thank God, one of the most valiant and most illustrious champions?

"But let's not go so high in criticism; I just want to cite an anecdote. — Not long ago, under Louis-Philippe, at the time when Armand Carrel was detained in Sainte-Pélagie for an article in the *National*, Chateaubriand, ill, not having been able to go see him in his cell, sent him a note of five lines, brilliant and warm as everything that fell from his pen: 'I only have a short time to live. I won't see your dreams come true. They are near dawning, I know it, I feel it. The Republic, the most beautiful of your chimeras, already appears on the horizon, but I will not be there to see it when it sets foot on our soil. Salute for me this queen of the future. — CHÂTEAUBRIAND.' — This note contained hopes which the law of the time proclaimed guilty; it was almost a crime. In any case, neither Armand Carrel nor Chateaubriand would have published it. Now, as this note had gotten lost *en route*, a third party had picked it up on the way to the prison, a mutual friend, and without the prior consent of the one who had written, nor of the one to whom the five lines were addressed, he divulged the prestigious message through the hundred voices of the press. That's how I have it. — Neither Armand Carrel nor Chateaubriand dared claim or speak of "breach of trust." And yet these were intimate confidences.

“This question of publishing letters has a thousand faces.

“Lamennais died in 1854, leaving posthumous works and particularly a precious correspondence, a large number of letters, both from himself and from most of the other illustrious men of his time. When he died, he charged one of his friends (E. Forgues) with ensuring the publication of these letters; but now his direct heirs, his family, entering into the theory of abstention, like P.-J. Proudhon, demanded that these epistles remain unpublished. We had to go to court to find out what to expect. Well, a fortnight ago, at the latest, a carefully reasoned judgment allowed the publication of letters, even those, please understand, “whose authors were not consulted.” — There are, it is said, in Lamennais' correspondence, a hundred letters from prelates, ministers, writers, princes and tribunes, some of whom are still living. — Conclude.

“To say it, in passing, P.-J. Proudhon's quip should make the situation of autograph owners particularly embarrassing. We know how many of these kinds of collectors, patient and studious artists, have multiplied. It cost them nothing to have ten lines from most of the considerable men of the time, neither the steps, nor the money, nor the time. All things considered, listening to the author of the letter to the Horsewoman, they would no longer own anything, an autograph only having value as long as it can be brought to light, and the authors would always say as P. -J. Proudhon says: ‘Do not show my letter: I am opposed to it.’

“But this is just a simple parenthesis.

“I said how many restrictions P.-J. Proudhon placed on freedom of thought. He does more. A curious thing! A bizarre thing! He appears to be the most jealous and inflexible of the proprietors. Without joking, he recalls this Parisian bourgeois, once so well represented by the young Lepeintre, who constantly said: ‘What is making noise in my house opposite?’ He tightens

the limits of literary property like a locksmith would do to the two legs of a vice. 'My work is mine, just mine.'

"This question of literary property has been on the table for more than twenty years, and it must be recognized that if it is not yet resolved, we tend, in general, to resolve it in the most liberal possible. In 1837, when there was talk of founding the *Société de Gens de lettres*, a society which lives on prohibition, as we know, one of P.-J. Proudhon's former colleagues, at the Constituent Assembly, a playwright and journalist, M. Félix Pyat, spoke out strongly, in the *Vert-Vert*, against the thought that was beginning to be expressed to 'forbid the publication of such and such a work, large or small.' — Among other things, he produced an argument that would not be without relevance to what concerns us. 'Virgil was close to committing a crime the day he spoke of burning the *Aeneid*. It is no more permissible for a vain writer or artist to conceal or destroy his work than it would be for a purchaser of grain to bury a sack of wheat in the ground or to throw it into the sea.' — That was not enough; he went further he took Mr. Thiers, then minister, to task, scolding him, not from the point of view of politics, but because he has at home, 'all to himself,' a group of Michelangelo's, which should be for everyone. — 'You have given, for example, to the French people, a copy of Michelangelo (that of the *Last Judgment*, by Sigalon); but you have, they say, an original of your own, a group of marvelous beauty, they always say. If this is passion, it is not generosity. Sacrificing the public for the private is undoubtedly very artistic and very proprietary, but not very ministerial, in the true sense of the word. It is even said that you don't show this group to anyone; at most, you let your friends see it. You neither want it to be molded nor engraved; the very view of it is forbidden and reproduction prohibited, like that of a serial novel.'

"Again, see the strangeness! P.-J. Proudhon is like two peas in a pod with M. Thiers! This takes us very far from those

caricatures in the *Charivari* of 1848, where Cham shows us the first, trying hard to demolish a house with a hammer, a house that the other strives to replaster with a trowel. But everyday experience demonstrates that in a mobile century par excellence, every public man must invoke the chapter of variations for his benefit.

"I won't say anything about the rest of the joke. The susceptibility shown by P.-J. Proudhon is too respectable for me not to understand it. Admitting, something impossible, that his known or unknown letters were not as honorable as the two that I gave, I would never have put him himself in the situation of being ashamed of it, — he can be sure. — I add that if, after the publication of the first epistle, I could have thought that he felt the slightest concern about it, the second, that of the younger B***, of La Ferté-Bernard, would not have been reproduced. "

And I signed my name.

P.-J. Proudhon answered me nothing. I only knew, through a mutual friend, that he would not be sorry to see me for a moment, if only to discuss one of the facts relating to the two letters. — P.-J. Proudhon had been my dinner companion, and better still, my friend, in 1847, when a group of patriots brought him from Lyon to Paris to found a newspaper. I was even one of the five who had the mission to go and receive him at the Messageries, when the stagecoach got off. For three whole months, we met, chair to chair, seated at the same *table d'hôte*. My life as a boy having ended at that time, and February 24 having come like a clap of thunder, we found ourselves separated for a moment; but, in two or three meetings, it had been very pleasant for both of us to exchange a few friendly words and a handshake.

For my part, I could not help but have a strong feeling of respect for the clearest, most vigorous and most daring writer

that France has had since Voltaire. This controversy, which had just started without my knowledge, provided me with the opportunity to see my companion from 1847 again, and I hastened to seize it.

One day in September 1856, a cabriolet took me to rue d'Enfer, to the same house in which the publicist helped to arrest the coachman Collignon, who had just killed a bourgeois over a question of tips. The P.-J. Proudhon of the old days came to life again in the famous writer. I found him as simple, as benevolent, but as passionate in his speeches as I had known him, when we dined together at the *table d'hôte* on rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires.

Ten years had noticeably changed the physiognomy of the eloquent writer. P.-J. Proudhon, whom I had known to be almost frail, had gone from being stout to one of those premature obesities that are not always an indicator of good health. However, his whole machine did not cease to announce strength. I also found that his appearance was more correct, his speech less harsh, and that he was less lavish in his gestures when speaking. It was easy to guess that the friction of the world had modified in a more human sense what was initially too angular in his person. His voice also had less brilliance, but no less biting. At times it was clear and vibrant like the sound of a brass instrument; you could see that there was still a great deal of youth in him.

Such a man could only do everything with passion. He had been in quick succession, following the whim of events, journalist, representative of the people, organizer of a utopia, accused, condemned, prisoner, exile; he had married; he now had, being so poor, the serious responsibility of a father; he willingly advised all those who turned to him as a guide. Finally, he had returned to life, as a solitary thinker, in one of the least tumultuous extremities of Paris, writing many beautiful pages

for very little profit, reviled by some, disowned by others, constantly targeted by the sentinels of the reigning law. How then had he managed not to wear himself out, like so many others, in the struggles of politics, in prison, in exile; in the miscalculations of a legitimate ambition so quickly disappointed, and in the matter-of-factness of a little artist's existence full of troubles? — I explained this happy singularity to myself by the fact that he had made for himself a very severe rule of life. Indeed, P.-J. Proudhon remained a peasant of Franche-Comté, even in the midst of the whirlwind of Parisian life. He had not ceased for a single day to be sober and active. He only accepted from our society, all in relief, what is not the lie. We remember his remark, so naive and charming, to a rich man who invited him to come and add to the number of idlers who must have crowded, one night, into the salons of a rich hotel on the Place Saint-Georges: “It is not possible for me to accept your invitation, because I have the invariable habit of going to bed every night, at nine o’clock." Knowing the great art of borrowing from oneself, following the precept of an ancient philosopher, he was able to bear his poverty lightly. Thus the betrayal of fate. and the defeat of his chimeras may have afflicted his soul, but the harsh shell that enveloped his mind and the valiant springs that made it move prevented him from being deeply affected, in appearance, at least, by the ironies and by the splashes of fortune.

After ten years, I saw again, in the Rue d'Enfer, the vigorous dinner companion that I had known during three months with Pilhes, Auguste Luchet, T. Thoré, de Charles Ribeyrolles and four or five others who marched at the head of the young Democracy of that time; I found him, as I just said, noticeably changed; the mask of the face was gradually expanded and as if illuminated. He had more serenity in his face. In his smile, there was more benevolence. I have already said, the man of war had not vanished. On the contrary, never had P.-J. Proudhon

espoused with more ardor the ideas of the French Revolution, and, from the first words of our conversation, he did not fail to proclaim himself the liege-man of February 24; but we had to fall back on the mundane little episode that had led me to the home of the philosopher.

At the moment when I entered, he played with one of his little girls who still did not walk alone.

— Do you know, he said to me, why I have not gone to see you at the *Gazette de Paris?* It is because I fear encountering Mr. Gabriel Vicaire. In that case, you see, I could not be master of my own impulses.

At the same time, he showed me his two arms so agile and vigorous.

— Yes, if I had encountered that gentleman, I would have done him harm.

— But, I responded, I do not know Mr. Gabriel Vicaire; I have never seen him; he has never in his life set foot in the *Gazette de Paris,* and it is a thousand one to bet that he never will. What he communicated to us arrived by mail.

— It is not because of the letter that I speak with so much fury, responded P.-J. Proudhon; but because of the first mystification of which he made me the pawn.

He then told me that, in order to get an autograph from him, Mr. Gabriel Vicaire, using a subterfuge a little too borrowed from the theater of yesteryear, had taken on a disguise, and, in his letter, had presented himself as a woman, as a Horsewoman of the Hippodrome, named Mme. de Sainte-Hermine. The thinker, asking no further, had taken as real the request addressed to him to give advice to a jaded and downgraded woman. It was to obey a fine sentiment that he had written the long and beautiful letter that we know. A little later, even before the publication by the *Gazette de Paris*, he had learned that his correspondence was circulating as an object for sale at autograph dealers.

Hence all this anger and this letter written to the newspaper, a letter with the aid of which he speaks as much as he can to *anyone who will listen*.

— It is clear, he told me again, that I was the target of a mystification or a speculation of the same nature, when I replied to the young B*** of La Ferté-Bernard. Reread this letter, and you will see that I could clearly see that people were trying to make fun of me.

He lost his temper once again against the correspondent who had made him fall into such a crude trap, and, as he drove me back, his eyes still burning with anger, he repeated to me:

— Never introduce me to Mr. Gabriel Vicaire.

Such is the episode of this letter to the Squire which caused so much noise, around ten years ago. Since then, P.-J. Proudhon has ceased to live. Friends, obeying a pious and fruitful thought, brought together all his scattered writings to complete his Works. The letter to the so-called Madame de Sainte-Hermine will necessarily appear in the volume devoted to the publicist's correspondence, and it will not be the least read fragment of the interesting collection.

It is to make clear everything that happened regarding this subject that I have published this little book.

END

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