

Odd Sayings Of Three Pilgrims

Honore de Balzac

When the pope left his good town of Avignon to take up his residence in Rome, certain pilgrims were thrown out who had set out for this country, and would have to pass the high Alps, in order to gain this said town of Rome, where they were going to seek the / remittimus/ of various sins. Then were to be seen on the roads, and the hostellries, those who wore the order of Cain, otherwise the flower of the penitents, all wicked fellows, burdened with leprous souls, which thirsted to bathe in the papal piscina, and all carrying with them gold or precious things to purchase absolution, pay for their beds, and present to the saints. You may be sure that those who drank water going, on their return, if the landlords gave them water, wished it to be the holy water of the cellar.

At this time the three pilgrims came to this said Avignon to their injury, seeing that it was widowed of the pope. While they were passing the Rhodane, to reach the Mediterranean coast, one of the three pilgrims, who had with him a son about 10 years of age, parted company with the others, and near the town of Milan suddenly appeared again, but without the boy. Now in the evening, at supper, they had a hearty feast in order to celebrate the return of the pilgrim, who they thought had become disgusted with penitence through the pope not being in Avignon. Of these three roamer to Rome, one had come from the city of Paris, the other from Germany, and the third, who doubtless wished to instruct his son on the journey, had his home in the duchy of Burgundy, in which he had certain fiefs, and was a younger son of the house of Villers-la-Faye (Villa in Fago), and was named La Vaugrenand. The German baron had met the citizen of Paris just past Lyons, and both had accosted the Sire de la Vaugrenand in sight of Avignon.

Now in this hostelry the three pilgrims loosened their tongues, and agreed to journey to Rome together, in order the better to resist the foot pads, the night-birds, and other malefactors, who made it their business to ease pilgrims of that which weighed upon their bodies before the pope eased them of that which weighed upon their consciences. After drinking the three companions commenced to talk together, for the bottle is the key of conversation, and each made this confession--that the cause of his pilgrimage was a woman. The servant who watched their drinking, told them that of a hundred pilgrims who stopped in the locality, ninety-nine were travelling from the same thing. These three wise men then began to consider how pernicious is woman to man. The Baron showed the heavy gold chain that he had in his hauberk to present to Saint Peter, and said his crime was such that he would not get rid of with the value of two such chains. The Parisian took off his glove, and exposed a ring set with a white diamond, saying that he had a hundred like it for the pope. The Burgundian took off his hat, and exhibited two wonderful pearls, that were beautiful ear-pendants for Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, and candidly confessed that he would rather have left them round his wife's neck.

Thereupon the servant exclaimed that their sins must have been as great as those of Visconti.

Then the pilgrims replied that they were such that they had made a solemn vow in their minds never to go astray again during the remainder of their days, however beautiful the

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woman might be, and this in addition to the penance which the pope might impose upon them.

Then the servant expressed her astonishment that all had made the same vow. The Burgundian added, that this vow had been the cause of his lagging behind, because he had been in extreme fear that his son, in spite of his age, might go astray, and that he had made a vow to prevent people and beasts alike gratifying their passions in his house, or upon his estates. The baron having inquired the particulars of the adventure, the sire narrated the affair as follows:--

"You know that the good Countess Jeane d'Avignon made formerly a law for the harlots, who she compelled to live in the outskirts of the town in houses with window-shutters painted red and closed. Now passing in my company in this vile neighbourhood, my lad remarked these houses with closed window-shutters, painted red, and his curiosity being aroused--for these ten-year old little devils have eyes for everything--he pulled me by the sleeve and kept on pulling until he had learnt from me what these houses were. Then, to obtain peace, I told him that young lads had nothing to do with such places, and could only enter them at the peril of their lives, because it was a place where men and women were manufactured, and the danger was such for anyone unacquainted with the business that if a novice entered, flying chancres and other wild beasts would seize upon his face. Fear seized the lad, who then followed me to the hostelry in a state of agitation, and not daring to cast his eyes upon the said bordels. While I was in the stable, seeing to the putting up of the horses, my son went off like a robber, and the servant was unable to tell me what had become of him. Then I was in great fear of the wenches, but had confidence in the laws, which forbade them to admit such children. At supper-time the rascal came back to me looking no more ashamed of himself than did our divine Saviour in the temple among the doctors.

"Whence comes you?" said I to him.

"From the houses with the red shutters," he replied.

"Little blackguard," said I, "I'll give you a taste of the whip."

"Then he began to moan and cry. I told him that if he would confess all that had happened to him I would let him off the beating.

"Ha," said he, "I took care not to go in, because of the flying chancres and other wild beasts. I only looked through the chinks of the windows, in order to see how men were manufactured."

"And what did you see?" I asked.

"I saw," said he, "a fine woman just being finished, because she only wanted one peg, which a young worker was fitting in with energy. Directly she was finished she turned round, spoke to, and kissed her manufacturer."

"Have your supper," said I; and the same night I returned into Burgundy, and left him with his mother, being sorely afraid that at the first town he might want to fit a peg into some

girl."

"These children often make these sort of answers," said the Parisian. "One of my neighbour's children revealed the cuckoldom of his father by a reply. One day I asked, to see if he was well instructed at school in religious matters, 'What is hope?' 'One of the king's big archers, who comes here when father goes out,' said he. Indeed, the sergeant of the Archers was named Hope. My friend was dumbfounded at this, and, although to keep his countenance he looked in the mirror, he could not see his horns there."

The baron observed that the boy's remark was good in this way: that Hope is a person who comes to bed with us when the realities of life are out of the way.

"Is a cuckold made in the image of God?" asked the Burgundian.

"No," said the Parisian, "because God was wise in this respect, that he took no wife; therefore is He happy through all eternity."

"But," said the maid-servant, "cuckolds are made in the image of God before they are horned."

Then the three pilgrims began to curse women, saying that they were the cause of all the evils in the world.

"Their heads are as empty as helmets," said the Burgundian.

"Their hearts are as straight as bill-hooks," said the Parisian.

"Why are there so many men pilgrims and so few women pilgrims?" said the German baron.

"Their cursed member never sins," replied the Parisian; "it knows neither father nor mother, the commandments of God, nor those of the Church, neither laws divine or human: their member knows no doctrine, understands no heresies, and cannot be blamed; it is innocent of all, and always on the laugh; its understanding is nil; and for this reason do I hold it in utter detestation."

"I also," said the Burgundian, "and I begin to understand the different reading by a learned man of the verses of the Bible, in which the account of the creation is given. In this Commentary, which in my country we call a Noel, lies the reason of imperfection of this feature of women, of which, different to that of other females, no man can slake the thirst, such diabolical heat existing there. In this Noel is stated that the Lord God, having turned his head to look at a donkey, who had brayed for the first time in his Paradise, while he was manufacturing Eve, the devil seized this moment to put his finger into this divine creature, and made a warm wound, which the Lord took care to close with a stitch, from which comes the maid. By means of this frenum, the woman should remain closed, and children be made in the same manner in which God made the angels, by a pleasure far above carnal pleasure as the heaven is above the earth. Observing this closing, the devil, wild at being done, pinched the Sieur Adam, who was asleep, by the skin, and stretched a portion of it out in imitation of his diabolical tail; but as the father of man was on his back this appendage

came out in front. Thus these two productions of the devil had the desire to reunite themselves, following the law of similarities which God had laid down for the conduct of the world. From this came the first sin and the sorrows of the human race, because God, noticing the devil's work, determined to see what would come of it."

The servant declared that they were quite correct in the statements, for that woman was a bad animal, and that she herself knew some who were better under the ground than on it. The pilgrims, noticing then how pretty the girl was, were afraid of breaking their vows, and went straight to bed. The girl went and told her mistress she was harbouring infidels, and told her what they had said about women.

"Ah!" said the landlady, "what matters it to me the thoughts my customers have in their brains, so long as their purses are well filled."

And when the servant had told of the jewels, she exclaimed--

"Ah, these are questions which concern all women. Let us go and reason with them. I'll take the nobles, you can have the citizen."

The landlady, who was the most shameless inhabitant of the duchy of Milan, went into the chamber where the Sire de La Vaugrenand and the German baron were sleeping, and congratulated them upon their vows, saying that the women would not lose much by them; but to accomplish these said vows it was necessary they should endeavour to withstand the strongest temptations. Then she offered to lie down beside them, so anxious were she to see if she would be left unmolested, a thing which had never happened to her yet in the company of a man.

On the morrow, at breakfast, the servant had the ring on her finger, her mistress had the gold chain and the pearl earrings. The three pilgrims stayed in the town about a month, spending there all the money they had in their purses, and agreed that if they had spoken so severely of women it was because they had not known those of Milan.

On his return to Germany the Baron made this observation: that he was only guilty of one sin, that of being in his castle. The Citizen of Paris came back full of stories for his wife, and found her full of Hope. The Burgundian saw Madame de La Vaugrenand so troubled that he nearly died of the consolations he administered to her, in spite of his former opinions. This teaches us to hold our tongues in hostilities.

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