

The Vicar Of Azay-le-rideau

Honore de Balzac

In those days the priests no longer took any woman in legitimate marriage, but kept good mistresses as pretty as they could get; which custom has since been interdicted by the council, as everyone knows, because, indeed, it was not pleasant that the private confessions of people should be retold to a wench who would laugh at them, besides the other secret doctrines, ecclesiastical arrangements, and speculations which are part and parcel of the politics of the Church of Rome. The last priest in our country who theologically kept a woman in his parsonage, regaling her with his scholastic love, was a certain vicar of Azay-le-Ridel, a place later on most aptly named as Azay-le-Brule, and now Azay-le-Rideau, whose castle is one of the marvels of Touraine. Now this said period, when the women were not averse to the odour of the priesthood, is not so far distant as some may think, Monsieur D'Orgemont, son of the preceding bishop, still held the see of Paris, and the great quarrels of the Armagnacs had not finished. To tell the truth, this vicar did well to have his vicarage in that age, since he was well shapen, of a high colour, stout, big, strong, eating and drinking like a convalescent, and indeed, was always rising from a little malady that attacked him at certain times; and, later on, he would have been his own executioner, had he determined to observe his canonical continence. Add to this that he was a Tourainian, id est, dark, and had in his eyes flame to light, and water to quench all the domestic furnaces that required lighting or quenching; and never since at Azay has been such vicar seen! A handsome vicar was he, square-shouldered, fresh coloured, always blessing and chuckling, preferred weddings and christenings to funerals, a good joker, pious in Church, and a man in everything. There have been many vicars who have drunk well and eaten well; others who have blessed abundantly and chuckled consumedly; but all of them together would hardly make up the sterling worth of this aforesaid vicar; and he alone has worthily filled his post with benedictions, has held it with joy, and in it has consoled the afflicted, all so well, that no one saw him come out of his house without wishing to be in his heart, so much was he beloved. It was he who first said in a sermon that the devil was not so black as he was painted, and who for Madame de Cande transformed partridges into fish saying that the perch of the Indre were partridges of the river, and, on the other hand, partridges perch in the air. He never played artful tricks under the cloak of morality, and often said, jokingly, he would rather be in a good bed than in anybody's will, that he had plenty of everything, and wanted nothing. As for the poor and suffering, never did those who came to ask for wool at the vicarage go away shorn, for his hand was always in his pocket, and he melted (he who in all else was so firm) at the sight of all this misery and infirmity, and he endeavoured to heal all their wounds. There have been many good stories told concerning this king of vicars. It was he who caused such hearty laughter at the wedding of the lord of Valennes, near Sacche. The mother of the said lord had a good deal to do with the victuals, roast meats and other delicacies, of which there was sufficient quantity to feed a small town at least, and it is true, at the same time, that people came to the wedding from Montbazou, from Tours, from Chinon, from Langeais, and from everywhere, and stopped eight days.

Now the good vicar, as he was going into the room where the company were enjoying themselves, met the little kitchen boy, who wished to inform Madame that all the elementary substances and fat rudiments, syrups, and sauces, were in readiness for a

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pudding of great delicacy, the secret compilation, mixing, and manipulation of which she wished herself to superintend, intending it as a special treat for her daughter-in-law's relations. Our vicar gave the boy a tap on the cheek, telling him that he was too greasy and dirty to show himself to people of high rank, and that he himself would deliver the said message. The merry fellow pushes open the door, shapes the fingers of his left hand into the form of a sheath, and moves gently therein the middle finger of his right, at the same time looking at the lady of Valennes, and saying to her, "Come, all is ready." Those who did not understand the affair burst out laughing to see Madame get up and go to the vicar, because she knew he referred to the pudding, and not to that which the others imagined.

But a true story is that concerning the manner in which this worthy pastor lost his mistress, to whom the ecclesiastical authorities allowed no successor; but, as for that, the vicar did not want for domestic utensils. In the parish everyone thought it an honour to lend him theirs, the more readily because he was not the man to spoil anything, and was careful to clean them out thoroughly, the dear man. But here are the facts. One evening the good man came home to supper with a melancholy face, because he had just put into the ground a good farmer, whose death came about in a strange manner, and is still frequently talked about in Azay. Seeing that he only ate with the end of his teeth, and turned up his nose at a dish of tripe, which had been cooked in his own special manner, his good woman said to him--

"Have you passed before the Lombard (see MASTER CORNELIUS passim), met two black crows, or seen the dead man turn in his grave, that you are so upset?"

"Oh! Oh!"

"Has anyone deceived you?"

"Ha! Ha!"

"Come, tell me!"

"My dear, I am still quite overcome at the death of poor Cohegrue, and there is not at the present moment a good housewife's tongue or a virtuous cuckold's lips that are not talking about it."

"And what was it?"

"Listen! This poor Cohegrue was returning from market, having sold his corn and two fat pigs. He was riding his pretty mare, who, near Azay, commenced to caper about without the slightest cause, and poor Cohegrue trotted and ambled along counting his profits. At the corner of the old road of the Landes de Charlemagne, they came upon a stallion kept by the Sieur de la Carte, in a field, in order to have a good breed of horses, because the said animal was fleet of foot, as handsome as an abbot, and so high and mighty that the admiral who came to see it, said it was a beast of the first quality. This cursed horse scented the pretty mare; like a cunning beast, neither neighed nor gave vent to any equine ejaculation, but when she was close to the road, leaped over forty rows of vines and galloped after her, pawing the ground with his iron shoes, discharging the artillery of a lover who longs for an embrace, giving forth sounds to set the strongest teeth on edge, and so loudly, that the

people of Champy heard it and were much terrified thereat.

Cohegrue, suspecting the affair, makes for the moors, spurs his amorous mare, relying upon her rapid pace, and indeed, the good mare understands, obeys, and flies--flies like a bird, but a bowshot off follows the blessed horse, thundering along the road like a blacksmith beating iron, and at full speed, his mane flying in the wind, replying to the sound of the mare's swift gallop with his terrible pat-a-pan! pat-a-pan! Then the good farmer, feeling death following him in the love of the beast, spurs anew his mare, and harder still she gallops, until at last, pale and half dead with fear, he reaches the outer yard of his farmhouse, but finding the door of the stable shut he cries, 'Help here! Wife!' Then he turned round on his mare, thinking to avoid the cursed beast whose love was burning, who was wild with passion, and growing more amorous every moment, to the great danger of the mare. His family, horrified at the danger, did not go to open the stable door, fearing the strange embrace and the kicks of the iron-shod lover. At last, Cohegrue's wife went, but just as the good mare was half way through the door, the cursed stallion seized her, squeezed her, gave her a wild greeting, with his two legs gripped her, pinched her and held her tight, and at the same time so kneaded and knocked about Cohegrue that there was only found of him a shapeless mass, crushed like a nut after the oil has been distilled from it. It was shocking to see him squashed alive and mingling his cries with the loud love-sighs of the horse."

"Oh! the mare!" exclaimed the vicar's good wench.

"What!" said the priest astonished.

"Certainly. You men wouldn't have cracked a plumstone for us."

"There," answered the vicar, "you wrong me." The good man threw her so angrily upon the bed, attacked and treated her so violently that she split into pieces, and died immediately without either surgeons or physicians being able to determine the manner in which the solution of continuity was arrived at, so violently disjointed were the hinges and mesial partitions. You can imagine that he was a proud man, and a splendid vicar as has been previously stated.

The good people of the country, even the women, agreed that he was not to blame, but that his conduct was warranted by the circumstances.

From this, perhaps, came the proverb so much in use at that time, *Que l'aze le saille!* The which proverb is really so much coarser in its actual wording, that out of respect for the ladies I will not mention it. But this was not the only clever thing that this great and noble vicar achieved, for before this misfortune he did such a stroke of business that no robbers dare ask him how many angels he had in his pocket, even had they been twenty strong and over to attack him. One evening when his good woman was still with him, after supper, during which he had enjoyed his goose, his wench, his wine, and everything, and was reclining in his chair thinking where he could build a new barn for the tithes, a message came for him from the lord of Sacche, who was giving up the ghost and wished to reconcile himself with God, receive the sacrament, and go through the usual ceremonies. "He is a good man and loyal lord. I will go." said he. Thereupon he passed into the church, took the silver box where the blessed bread is, rang the little bell himself in order not to wake the

clerk, and went lightly and willingly along the roads. Near the Gue-droit, which is a valley leading to the Indre across the moors, our good vicar perceived a high toby. And what is a high toby? It is a clerk of St. Nicholas. Well, what is that? That means a person who sees clearly on a dark night, instructs himself by examining and turning over purses, and takes his degrees on the high road. Do you understand now? Well then, the high toby waited for the silver box, which he knew to be of great value.

"Oh! oh!" said the priest, putting down the sacred vase on a stone at the corner of the bridge, "stop thou there without moving."

Then he walked up to the robber, tipped him up, seized his loaded stick, and when the rascal got up to struggle with him, he gutted him with a blow well planted in the middle of his stomach. Then he picked up the viaticum again, saying bravely to it: "Ah! If I had relied upon thy providence, we should have been lost." Now to utter these impious words on the road to Sacche was mere waste of breath, seeing that he addressed them not to God, but to the Archbishop of Tours, who have once severely rebuked him, threatened him with suspension, and admonished him before the Chapter for having publicly told certain lazy people that a good harvest was not due to the grace of God, but to skilled labour and hard work--a doctrine which smelt of the fagot. And indeed he was wrong, because the fruits of the earth have need both of one and the other; but he died in this heresy, for he could never understand how crops could come without digging, if God so willed it--a doctrine that learned men have since proved to be true, by showing that formerly wheat grew very well without the aid of man. I cannot leave this splendid model of a pastor without giving here one of the acts of his life, which proves with what fervour he imitated the saints in the division of their goods and mantles, which they gave formerly to the poor and the passers-by. One day, returning from Tours, where he had been paying his respects to the official, mounted on his mule, he was nearing Azay. On the way, just out side Ballan, he met a pretty girl on foot, and was grieved to see a woman travelling like a dog; the more so as she was visibly fatigued, and could scarcely raise one foot before the other. He whistled to her softly, and the pretty wench turned round and stopped. The good priest, who was too good a sportsman to frighten the birds, especially the hooded ones, begged her so gently to ride behind him on his mule, and in so polite a fashion, that the lass got up; not without making those little excuses and grimaces that they all make when one invites them to eat, or to take what they like. The sheep paired off with the shepherd, the mule jogged along after the fashion of mules, while the girl slipped now this way now that, riding so uncomfortably that the priest pointed out to her, after leaving Ballan, that she had better hold on to him; and immediately my lady put her plump arms around the waist of her cavalier, in a modest and timorous manner.

"There, you don't slip about now. Are you comfortable?" said the vicar.

"Yes, I am comfortable. Are you?"

"I?" said the priest, "I am better than that."

And, in fact, he was quite at his ease, and was soon gently warmed in the back by two projections which rubbed against it, and at last seemed as though they wished to imprint themselves between his shoulder blades, which would have been a pity, as that was not the place for this white merchandise. By degrees the movement of mule brought into

conjunction the internal warmth of these two good riders, and their blood coursed more quickly through their veins, seeing that it felt the motion of the mule as well as their own; and thus the good wench and the vicar finished by knowing each other's thoughts, but not those of the mule. When they were both acclimatised, he with her and she with him, they felt an internal disturbance which resolved itself into secret desires.

"Ah!" said the vicar, turning round to his companion, "here is a fine cluster of trees which has grown very thick."

"It is too near the road," replied the girl. "bad boys have cut the branches, and the cows have eaten the young leaves."

"Are you not married?" asked the vicar, trotting his animal again.

"No," said she.

"Not at all?"

"'Faith! No!"

"What a shame, at your age!"

"You are right, sir; but you see, a poor girl who has had a child is a bad bargain."

Then the good vicar taking pity on such ignorance, and knowing that the canons say among other things that pastors should indoctrinate their flock and show them the duties and responsibilities of this life, he thought he would only be discharging the functions of his office by showing her the burden she would have one day to bear. Then he begged her gently not be afraid, for if she would have faith in his loyalty no one should ever know of the marital experiment which he proposed then and there to perform with her; and as, since passing Ballan the girl had thought of nothing else; as her desire had been carefully sustained, and augmented by the warm movements of the animal, she replied harshly to the vicar, "if you talk thus I will get down." Then the good vicar continued his gentle requests so well that on reaching the wood of Azay the girl wished to get down, and the priest got down there too, for it was not across a horse that this discussion could be finished. Then the virtuous maiden ran into the thickest part of the wood to get away from the vicar, calling out, "Oh, you wicked man, you shan't know where I am."

The mule arrived in a glade where the grass was good, the girl tumbled down over a root and blushed. The good vicar came to her, and there as he had rung the bell for mass he went through the service for her, and both freely discounted the joys of paradise. The good priest had it in his heart to thoroughly instruct her, and found his pupil very docile, as gentle in mind as soft in the flesh, a perfect jewel. Therefore was he much aggrieved at having so much abridged the lessons by giving it at Azay, seeing that he would have been quite willing to recommence it, like all of precentors who say the same thing over and over again to their pupils.

"Ah! little one," cried the good man, "why did you make so much fuss that we only came to an understanding close to Azay?"

"Ah!" said she, "I belong to Bellan."

To be brief, I must tell you that when this good man died in his vicarage there was a great number of people, children and others, who came, sorrowful, afflicted, weeping, and grieved, and all exclaimed, "Ah! we have lost our father." And the girls, the widows, the wives and little girls looked at each other, regretting him more than a friend, and said, "He was more than a priest, he was a man!" Of these vicars the seed is cast to the winds, and they will never be reproduced in spite of the seminaries.

Why, even the poor, to whom his savings were left, found themselves still the losers, and an old cripple whom he had succoured hobbled into the churchyard, crying "I don't die! I don't!" meaning to say, "Why did not death take me in his place?" This made some of the people laugh, at which the shade of the good vicar would certainly not have been displeased.

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