

THEOPHILE

WHEN we first went to the Pyrenees we lived in a tiny village at the foot of the Pic de Ger, about half-an-hour's walk from Lourdes.

Our village was a charming place. It was made up entirely of farmhouses, little and big, all of them colour-washed, most of them end-on to the road with their cobbled yards beside them, and all of them enclosed behind great gates as if they expected to be put into a state of siege at any minute. Even *Monsieur le Curé's* house had originally been a two-roomed farmhouse. So, too, had ours till it had been converted to a villa by an enterprising son of the village. He had knocked away the lofts and the pent roofs with their little dormer windows, and the house now boasted two stories, with the traditional *galérie* and a series of attics.

All the floors had been renewed. From that fact hangs my tale.

The floor boards, instead of being made of ancient chestnut, black with age, were now just ordinary white deal. They must all be waxed and polished. Not stained. Let them be lemon gold and let us keep them so . . . like pale sunlight even on darkest days. Difficult to have, more difficult still to keep, but well worth it.

To wax, I could manage at a pinch, though the thought of crawling on hand and knees over all those acres of floor appalled me. Polishing was out of the question. Electric brushes were unknown in Lourdes then. One had to work with a brush weighted with lead and so heavy that I could hardly lift it. To manipulate it would be impossible.

I applied to our landlord, an ingenious fellow, who, possessing ten children ranging between the ages of

one and twelve, brought them up beautifully and yet had time to put out a helping hand to all his neighbours.

At first he shook his head pessimistically.

'Rather difficult, Madame,' he said. 'All the *brosseurs* for miles round are engaged in the hotels. But I'll see what I can do.'

I thanked him. I knew him. That he would do what he could was already food for hope.

Within a few days a limp giant with tousled locks presented himself. His name was Hyppolite. (They retain the old Roman names in the Pyrenees). He looked to me suspiciously pious. Hard workers don't go about in a thick fog of piety. They have no mystical auras perceptible to common folk. They *look* like hard workers.

I invited him in.

He looked at the floors and the tin of beeswax and the brushes. Then, with manifest reluctance, he took off his coat.

He began by putting dabs of wax all over the floors in the manner of housewives making puff pastry—except that he didn't work anything like so fast. Though I had never waxed a floor I knew this method to be inappropriate. However, as this might be some fashion peculiar to the Midi, I said nothing.

Having given the wax a suitable time to dry—half an hour or so, during which he encouraged it by watching it, his head hanging sideways on his long thin stalk of a neck—he condescended to rub it up a bit, using the brushes with an air of detachment. When they were finally well clogged with wax and the floors were like muddy pools, he intimated that the work was over. He then charged me an enormous sum and went away.

I called him back to tell him that we should not grieve if we never saw him again.

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It would have been far, far better had he never come.

We applied to our landlord again.

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On the following Saturday, at nine o'clock in the morning, our door bell rang. I went down to open it.

There stood on the threshold, *béret* in hand, a little bird-like creature with long drooping moustachios and melancholy eyes. Otherwise his manner was alert enough. He was wearing thick brown trousers of Pyrenees homespun and a flannel shirt without collar or tie; his homespun jacket hung over one shoulder in the manner of the local peasantry; his middle man was decorated with a red woollen sash, and on his feet were *sabots* curved up in front like the prow of a boat. He had no socks.

He bowed and looked at me trustfully out of those pathetic eyes of his. He was the *brosseur*. He could give me two hours every Saturday. He would want half the wages of the giant Hyppolite. He could begin work at once.

'*Vous vous appelez?*'

'Théophile, Madame.'

'But I've seen you before, Théophile, in the village, haven't I?'

'Yes, Madame; I live opposite.'

He waved his hand towards a pink-washed farm, its meticulously tidy farmyard enclosed behind iron railings and double gates that were almost magnificent. The morning sun was gilding the windows and the maize-cobs hanging in bunches from the eaves.

I was impressed.

'I am also *cantonnier*, Madame.'

That was it. I had him now. He was the local road-cleaner. I had seen his steadily bowed back as he scraped away at the weeds in the village street

and cleaned out the gutters; and the thought struck me suddenly that no French village I had ever passed through could boast such a beautifully kept roadway as ours.

He removed his *sabots* in the hall and stood there in his bare feet. A *bain de pied* is an event to a French peasant. Théophile's feet were immaculate. They shamed my floors.

I produced the wax and the brushes. He asked for *paille de fer*.

Carefully, evenly, with those scratchy wire shavings he removed all trace of Hyppolite's passing. Carefully, evenly, with reverence, he spread the fragrant wax . . . true wax of bees that when blessed by Holy Church becomes a sacramental. Then he detached the brush from its pole, tied it under his right foot and rhythmically brushed, to and fro, to and fro, with a movement as free and graceful as a Russian dancer's. Soon tables and chairs were standing on their own serene reflections as though anchored in still waters above golden sands. Never had there been such floors.

But I thought that Théophile looked tired when his two hours came to an end.

I examined his face attentively.

He was not young. His olive skin and black hair had deceived me . . . or else I had been blinded by the light that had been for hours now pouring in at the unshuttered windows. He was fifty at least, perhaps even older than that. How gentle he was! How child-like! But above all, how tragically sad were his big brown eyes! They surveyed my face as if searching my thoughts, as if trying to discover if I were sympathetic. He had the look of a lost or wounded child.

As time went on, and as Saturday was added to Saturday, he told me a little of his history. The im-

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portant facts were few and obscure, but they were significant enough to him. He had been married once, somewhat late in life, to a young girl who had died in giving birth to their only child. In spite of disparity of age, or maybe because of it, he and his wife had worshipped one another. He worshipped her memory still. When he spoke of her, it was in low tones as one might speak of a saint. He saw life truly as a state of exile. He longed for death as for a festival. But with the supernatural virtue of a thoroughbred Catholic, he waited in profound and humble patience for the hour of God.

The baby had lived just long enough for baptism. It had been buried with its mother.

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The spring passed and the spring rains with it; and now, as summer progressed and the heat grew fiercer, Théophile's strength that had never quite equalled his will-power, seemed to flag. He panted a little at his work. Under his deepening tan he appeared to grow paler. His face was drawn. He was thinner. He was evidently losing weight. Though he never complained, I was anxious.

We arranged for rests during his work, and they grew more frequent. My floors began to suffer, but I would rather they never again reflected a ray of sunlight than that Théophile should look so increasingly stricken. And now . . . alarming symptom . . . he began to speak of pain . . . internal, dull, intermittent, curious, inexplicable. Alas! I guessed the source of it, and so did others. We spoke of our fears to one another, but, not yet, to Théophile.

Meantime, the village street was not as it had been. The weeds that were never wont to do more than peep above the surface of the ground flaunted wantonly along the walls, round the *fontaine*, and even, as time

went on, in the road, between the tracks of cart-wheels on either side and the tracks of mules and oxen in the middle.

Théophile worked as before . . . hour after hour in the scorching sun, except for the traditional two hours rest at midday when even the dogs were quiet, and only the hens seemed to stir in all the countryside. But, though he worked his scheduled hours and worked with the full strength that was in him, vigour was fading, and he could do so very little. His work was beating him. His eyes grew more melancholy. They seemed at last to fill his face.

One day—it was August—I ventured out about two o'clock, the hour when the siesta ends. It may have been an even more oppressive day than usual, for there was no one but myself in the whole length of the village street. Even the birds were silent and the leaves on the trees were still.

I was regretting my impulse to get to the woods at such an hour, when round the bend of the road I came upon Théophile. He was sitting on the ground, his back against the churchyard wall, his head between his knees.

At first I did not recognise him. He was only a blur of coloured shadow in the shade; but as I drew nearer I saw who it was.

I thought him asleep, and moved softly so as not to disturb him; but just as I was passing him he raised his head. His face was deadly white—or was there already in it a queer tinge of yellow?

I went up to him.

'Mon pauvre Théophile, vous êtes malade?'

'Je le crois, Madame,' he said simply, anguish in his eyes. *'The pain got me suddenly and I thought I should fall, so I sat down here.'*

He indicated with motion of thumb to shoulder the churchyard wall behind him.

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I helped him home, gently scolding him the while for not taking more care of himself. He stumbled along, tripping over the tufts of grass that grew where no grass had grown before in all the years of his manhood.

For a few weeks he sat in a chair at his open door, wrapped—in spite of the sun—in an old shepherd's cloak, its peaked hood pulled over his head, his peaked face, with its fine moustache—his only pride—looking the more peaked and yellow in its depths. A doctor came and prescribed, but, away from the house, he shrugged his shoulders. There was so little that he could do.

The summer faded and autumn came. Pain that sometimes touched on agony slowly drank up Théophile's remaining strength. He, who for eighteen years had cooked and cleaned and washed and mended for himself, was at last dependent on his neighbours. He hated it. He had never endured a woman's foot in his house since his wife had last crossed his threshold—and that was when neighbours had carried her from the great bed in their one living room to the green field against whose wall he had fallen on that summer afternoon when I had found him fainting in the sun. But though it distressed him inexpressibly that other women should minister to him, yet, with patience now rooted in his soul, he let them have their way, thanking them at each day's end with a little tortured smile.

Through the early October days he dragged himself with pain and care from bed to chair and from chair to bed again; and whenever the sun shone into his farmyard he sat outside as before, wrapped closely in his great brown cloak, a blanket over his bony knees, his rosary in his fingers. The neighbours would nod to him in passing. '*Adishat, Théophile!*' they would call to him in *patois*—and he would manage to

shake his head feebly in acknowledgement. But he never lowered his eyes to the incredibly dirty road. And no one cleaned it for him. How could they? Théophile must believe to the end that next week he would be hearty as ever, that next week he would have it immaculate again. Did Théophile himself believe it? I think not. In the intervals of pain and unquiet sleep he said his rosary incessantly, and once I caught him looking up at a patch of blue sky above a neighbouring roof and smiling to himself.

One day a heavy storm of hail bounced into the gutters. It blocked the runnels. It blocked the gutter under the sill of Théophile's gate, and a puddle grew and grew. When bright sunshine succeeded the storm Théophile crawled to his door again, and from thence he watched the hail melting.

The puddle at his gateway spread across the road. It became a pond. Somebody opened a farmyard gate, and a run of ducks caught sight of it. Wings up, atiptoe, in unison of precipitation, they rushed for it, splashing and quacking. Théophile heard them.

He beheld his street, in which he had never allowed a puddle to attain the size of a soup-plate, a lagoon impassable for pedestrians, a pond for ducks. It was the last time that he looked on the sun. When the neighbour whose turn it was to help him to bed that night came in, she found him already there, his face turned to the wall. He never rose from it again.

A few days later he asked for the Last Sacraments. He showed no emotion, they told me, when he made the request, maintaining to the end the patience that had cradled his soul for so many years between vain hope and despair. Once only was his calm broken, and that was when he pointed a shaking finger to someone we could not see who seemed to move for a time about his bed. He smiled at this friend—mirage or reality, I cannot tell you—and his face appeared

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transfigured. Then he nodded as if to ratify an appointment, twisted his head towards me, nodded to me too, sighed, turned his head on the pillow again like a weary child seeking an easier position, closed his eyes, slept, and so died.

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They dressed him in the decent black clothes that had served him for his marriage, they folded his hands with his rosary between the fingers, they laid his crucifix upon his breast, they lighted tall candles at his head and feet.

All day long the neighbours came to visit him, turn and turn about, so that he was never lonely. They wept for the loss of a friend, but their sighs were broken with prayers. Théophile, who had spent his life in making their paths straight and their ways clean, must not now stumble on his own way. Their lips moved incessantly. The candle flames flickered. A shutter creaked in the wind. And Théophile lay there, wrapped in a vast dignity, a triumphant smile fixed upon his lips.

Inside that solemn room sound went on whispering feet, but outside, in the draughty autumn weather, the whole village was in motion. The fields were deserted, the cattle left in the stall. Outside the church men shovelled mud into a dung-cart. A woman cleared a gutter with a hoe. At the taps and cattle-troughs people were filling buckets, and the chains rattled and the winches creaked as the farmyard wells yielded their supply. Splash! went the water on the cobblestones and flagstones. *Sabots* clattered. How many cries of 'Mind your feet!' and always the swilling and the splashing of water. Only when it was quite dark did the work cease. Early the next morning holes were filled with stones, and when the sun rose it shone on a road worthy of Théophile.

Théophile

It was the road he had followed on so many occasions of ceremony—to Baptism, to his First Confession and Communion, to his Marriage with his bride on his arm. That was the occasion when he first wore the black clothes of ceremony. He had worn them again when the road seemed to have tilted and grown steep like the Hill of Calvary—when he had stumbled blindly along behind a yellow box. But never on those journeys had he moved so smoothly as now.

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