The Mussels and the Professor

"Sorry to disturb you, my dear," said Madame Poncelet as she opened the door to his study.

The aged professor set his pen down on a blotter and raised his head. Beyond the *Aeneid*, through a fog, her face appeared. Then the fog lifted. Jolted back to the present, the old man saw his wife, wrapped up in a flannel robe and an old black overcoat with the collar turned up around her ears. And he saw his wife's sweet face, worn yet still radiant with the secret smile she had had when she was twenty-five, back when he had married her. His life had come to depend on that secret smile ever since.

"Yes, dear, what is it?" he asked.

"You must go to the tripe shop to see if our number has come up," she said.[1] "And maybe you could stop at the fish market on the way back."

---

1. Madame Poncelet's comment refers to the Vichy-imposed rationing system of 1940 that issued *cartes de ravitaillement* (provisions cards) authorizing the holder to purchase indicated items (food, coal, gas, clothing, etc.) at specified times and in quantities that depended mainly on the individual's age, gender, and profession. The system drastically reduced the daily food intake of much of the French population, from at best 1,700 calories at the beginning of the occupation to 1,200 or less by the end.

"I should probably go to the fish market first," said Monsieur Poncelet.

"Whatever you prefer, my love," she said, going back into the kitchen.

He slipped on his fur-lined coat with its well-worn collar and pulled a beret down on his head. He would not have to hold on to this one, even if the wind kicked up. It was better for waiting in line. Then, after glancing over his desk with a mixture of melancholy, regret, and perhaps a little irony, he went to the kitchen to get the canvas shopping bag that had a piece of cord where the handle used to be.

"You're not going to clean the kitchen in this cold, are you?" he asked.

"Well, we can't live with this filth all winter long. Anyway, it's a little milder today."

For warmth, they only lit the fire in his study because he had to try to carry on with his important work—the most important work of his life—*The Origins of the* Aeneid. He just had to carry on, despite everything. So they had moved a sofa into his study, and that is where they slept, worked, ate, and cooked on a little hot plate.

Stirring a pot, she would say: "I'm sorry about the noise."

To which he would respond: "You know very well you're never a bother to me. Living like this has only brought us closer."

But this was not the way he had imagined either one of them spending their twilight years. No indeed, not like this.

For she was old, and he worried about the heart problems she suffered periodically, but he could not get any help for her, not even a house cleaner, because the Germans could pay much more than a retired professor could. And he and his wife could not get away to Cannes or Nice during the grayest months of the year, as he had promised they would "once he retired," because that meant crossing the demarcation line that had cut France in two;[2] on the other side things were even more expensive than in Paris because of all those rich people who had gone to live there for the duration of the war. But in Paris, at least, people felt like they were resisting. They were resisting. And so as he made his way to the fish market, the wind lashing his face (what on earth had made Annette say the weather was milder today?), the old man could almost imagine himself engaged in an act of resistance, one small but necessary link in the tenacious chain of human history.

2. Established by the armistice of June 1940 after France fell to the Germans, a 1,200-kilometer *ligne de démarcation* (demarcation line) divided Nazi-occupied France in the north and west from the so-called free zone in the southeast, which the Vichy government administered under the leadership of the *maréchal* (marshal) Philippe Pétain. By March 1943, all of France was under Nazi occupation.

There was already a line along the sidewalk, a long line of women wearing mittens and headscarves knotted beneath their chins. They were pressed up against the closed grating of the fish market, like ants on the carcass of an earthworm, ants out scrambling for food after a boot has kicked over their anthill. And did we amount to much more than that? Not a very original comparison, Monsieur Poncelet readily admitted, but who could come up with anything better in wind and cold like this? The point is, if we are constantly worried about keeping warm and finding food, what distinguishes us from animals? Human life begins beyond that. He thought for a moment about how his work *The Origins of the* Aeneid represented both the goal of his life and its justification, and he shrugged his shoulders.

All around him, he saw faces blue with cold. He recognized some from running into them on a daily basis as they waited anxiously outside the shops. He knew that one young woman had a husband who was a prisoner and that she was waiting for him to come home. But the days had become months and then years of anxious waiting on the muddy sidewalks.[3] He knew the old peasant woman with tightly pursed lips had come from somewhere deep

3. Over 2.5 million French people spent time in German captivity during the war, either as forced laborers or prisoners of war. Most of the latter (around 1.5 million in total), who were taken in 1940, were not returned to France until 1945.

in the Pyrenees "to do the lines" for her daughter who was working in a factory: "When you have two children to feed, Monsieur, and a husband who doesn't even earn enough to support himself . . ."

Spectacular news circulated by word of mouth, endlessly repeated and expanded on. For the professor, it was an opportunity to see how a people's epic history first emerges, takes shape, and then spreads.[4] This direct experience of the oral tradition made him think of Homer or *The Song of Roland*, and he smiled despite the cold.

When the fish market finally opened, the professor found himself progressing through the line by about one step every five minutes: how strange this life was.

From time to time, boot steps resounded on the sidewalk. As a soldier in a field-gray uniform was passing by,

4. I translate "la geste de tout un peuple" as "a people's epic history." Not to be confused with *le geste* (meaning "gesture" or "movement"), *la geste* refers to an ensemble of medieval epic poems that were recited before both elite and popular (i.e., illiterate) audiences and that recount, among other things, acts of wartime heroism meant to solidify a people's sense of themselves as a community or nation. *The Song of Roland* dates back to the eleventh or twelfth century and recounts a battle of Charlemagne's from the eighth century. *La geste* harks further back to classical epic poetry, such as that of Homer, as both are believed to have their origins in the oral tradition and may be either the works of individual authors or the collective and anonymous productions of a people. While these works have footing in history, how they are told and embellished is what determines their popularity and continued transmission.

one woman said behind his back: "So many of the bastards. They're like lice. When are we going to be rid of them?"

The others nodded in agreement.

At that time, French-language German newspapers were promoting collaboration between France and Germany. But the people were not fooled by this. They immediately understood what was meant by "collaboration"—long before their bourgeois counterparts did, Monsieur Poncelet noted—and it was nothing short of the enslavement of an entire continent, the most absolute subjection witnessed in centuries. Hearing the boot steps fade in the distance, Monsieur Poncelet thought about how true collaboration would not come until men had become human again. And it would not be the rulers who made that happen, but the people, just as soon as they had had enough suffering.

He could see himself in front of his students again, as he corralled them through his grand lecture on the relentless march of history.[5] Then, feeling a bit ridiculous, he smiled and took another step forward.

5. In the French, the professor sees himself mounted upon "le grand percheron tranquille de l'histoire," a metaphor not readily translatable into English. A Percheron is a French breed of horse highly valued for its power, endurance, intelligence, and even temperament. Both heavy and quick, it is ideal for driving and hauling as well as for riding. From the Middle Ages through World War II, the Percheron featured in war, agriculture, transportation, and construction, after which it was replaced by technologies of the modernization it played an elemental role in bringing about.

Now he could see inside the shop. There were a number of large baskets, all filled with mussels.

"There will be enough for everyone," said a woman standing next to him.

"As long as no priority cases show up," added the old peasant woman in a sour tone, having loosened her tightly pursed lips just long enough to say her piece. "As long no priority cases show up.[6] How's a mother supposed to have three children if she has to watch the first two starve to death before the third one comes along?"[7]

The professor was always amazed by the common sense these women had and by their courage, their minimal complaining—a kind of unselfconscious stoicism. Deep down, human beings were actually a lot better than he thought they were when he kept to his office with his nose in a book. What might these people have become

6. Those who stood in line had to deal not only with the interminable waits and the increasing likelihood that they would go home empty-handed, while a black market catered to the French elite, Vichy operatives, and German occupiers, but also with the fact that priority cards allowed pregnant and nursing women to be served first and to buy in greater quantities, which generated animosity among the shoppers, who were mainly women. While rioting did sometimes break out, as time wore on the lines increasingly provided opportunities for demonstrations—organized largely by women—against the Vichy and Nazi regimes.

7. The peasant woman's remark alludes to Pétain's relentless probirth campaign promising material rewards to families with three or more children.

under more favorable circumstances? Who knows? Would we ever know?

Another step forward. There were not many mussels left in the baskets.

"There won't be enough for everyone," the woman standing next to him now remarked.

Humankind, what a tremendous adventure! mused the professor, even with the rush of wind biting into his nose and ears, and the absurdity of waiting hours for a pound of mussels he never even liked in the first place, and the knowledge that all this time his *Origins of the* Aeneid had not advanced by a single sentence.

"It's no use waiting any longer," said the woman standing next to him: "There won't be any left for us."

True enough, the last basket was practically empty. But Monsieur Poncelet continued to wait in line anyway, as a matter of intellectual principle, out of his need for proof and verification. So the professor did not leave until he watched the last mussel disappear into someone else's shopping basket.

He still had to stop by the tripe shop. There was no waiting there, though, because his number had not come up. Getting provisions was like playing a lottery no one ever won. Slowly, he made his way back home, the old, empty shopping bag dangling from his arm.

"So, my dear, did you bring us anything?"

"No," he answered apologetically.

He should have left a little earlier, torn himself away from the *Aeneid* on his own initiative, not waited for his wife to have to ask.

"You're freezing," she said, taking hold of his hand, "I'll make some herbal tea to warm you up."

He sat back down at his desk. He could hear his wife moving about the little portable stove. He could feel her presence.

"Have a cube of sugar," she said.

He knew she was depriving herself for him. He watched her secret smile and could feel its tenderness.

Yes, life was a remarkable adventure.