

THE MERCHANTS OF HEALTH

Preface

If I had to choose a name for our century I would call it the century of turnabouts.

Indeed!

What triumphant reactions! What comebacks by parties once lost!

I am not, of course, speaking politically, but only with regard to the social hierarchy. Look around. Victims have almost always ended up making a pedestal of their misfortunes—unless they preferred to make income out of them.

Ridicule, instead of killing them, has fattened them.

Take, for instance, the husband. There were not enough epithets in the dictionary with which to abuse him. Novels and plays, prose and verse, pen and pencil all conspired against him, all bombarded him, all took aim at his head.

Then, suddenly, the wind changed. The vanquished has become the victor, an aureole crowns the conjugal head, so long accustomed to another coiffure—to the extent that today, novels and plays, prose and verse, pen and pencil all set out to exalt the right of conjugal property.

The husband has killed the lover, and what is more, has inherited his sentimental wardrobe. Monsieur One-Too-Many is god, and the litterateurs have instituted themselves as his prophets.

And then there is the grocer.

O Homeric memories! O helmet of immortal luster! O epic of the grotesque! O treacle! O Gavarni!¹

“To be born a man and become a grocer!” people sniggered once, thinking that they had surpassed the Pillars of Hercules of disdain.

“To be born a grocer and to become a millionaire!” replied the man with the paper bags.

And he has done what he said. He has gained in seriousness as he has accumulated cash, has got used to frowning majestically and buying villas, and has been promoted to officer in the National Guard, alderman, perhaps mayor of the commune in which his estates lie.

Bow down to the counter that people once wanted to make into a pillory, and which had the talent to metamorphose into a throne.

Thirdly and finally—for I shall have to cut the list short here—consider the physician. What ironic nicknames were attached to that proud title! Monsieur Desfonandres here,² Uncle Murderer there, Purgon to the right, Diafoirus to the left,³ and before the satires, the parodies, the pointed hats, the syringes.

Our ancestors almost went from mocking their doctors to wanting to get rid of them.

There too the reaction has set in. Bow your head, proud Sicambre, adore the hero of the leech and the purgative that you once mocked.⁴

¹ The reference is to the illustrator and caricaturist Paul Gavarni (1804-1866), once a leading contributor to *Le Charivari*, although he became more closely associated in the final years of his career with *L'Illustration*, when he also became intensely interested in science and aerial navigation.

² Monsieur Desfonandres [approximately, “Sinkpeople”] is a physician in Molière’s *L’Amour Médecin* (1665) who favors enemas as a treatment; the name is rendered Des Fonandres in most modern versions, but the spelling Véron employs is more frequent in older printings.

³ Purgon and Diafoirus are two physicians features in Molière’s last play, *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673). Molière collapsed during his fourth performance in the leading role, that of hypochondriac Argan and died shortly thereafter—something that might be borne in mind while reading Véron’s novella, which is a sequel of sorts to *Le Malade imaginaire*.

What was necessary for that reversal of fortune? A lot of science? Yes, if you life, but even more white cravats. What a subject of philosophical study: the influence of starch on human dignity!

What has happened to the augurs of medicine is the reverse of what became of the augurs of paganism. The latter began in respect to end in sarcasm; we are witnessing the inverse process.

That probably comes from the fact that the augurs of medicine, wiler than their predecessors, have learned to look at themselves without laughing.

Still, the turnabout is striking—too striking, in truth, and the idea of this book is inspired by that very excess. Not that I am weary of hearing Aristides called the Just, but there are contraband Aristides everywhere—fake good men and fake good doctors.

With their intention, I have written *The Merchants of Health*. If you sell chicory as coffee, you can be hauled up in court; you who sell adulterated health can at least be held up to caricature. True merit cannot be attained by this triage; to suppress weeds is to strengthen the good grain.

And now, may the shade of Molière protect me!

⁴ This sentence adapts the famous phrase allegedly employed by the Bishop of Reims, Saint Remy, when baptizing the Merovingian king Clovis: “Courbe-toi, fier Sicambre, adore ce que tu as brûlé” [Bow your head, proud Sicambrian, adore what you have burned.] The Sicambrians were a Germanic tribe, although the term is applied very loosely in the remark.

I. I Have the Honor of Introducing to You...

Do you remember Argan?

Argan, the eccentric of the insinuating decoctions, preparations and remollients for softening, moistening and refreshing Monsieur's entrails?

Argan, the consumer of fine purgative and corroborative medicines for expelling and evacuating Monsieur's bile?

Argan the *Malade Imaginaire*, since it's necessary to spell it out. And perhaps you've often wondered what became of that eccentric after the famous session in which he was judged *dignus intrare in docto corpore*.⁵

The poor fellow, it appears, died of joy, but did not die entirely, and Mademoiselle Angelique, his daughter, took charge of continuing his posterity.

That posterity lived in Paris a few years ago, in the person of a male descendant whom I knew well, and whom you will permit me to introduce to you.

Monsieur Argan, by virtue of the frequent effect of skipping generations, was the exact image of his overly celebrated ancestor. In his cradle, his nurse had surprised him several times in the instinctive attitude of an invalid taking his pulse.

As a toddler, he stuck out his tongue at every fragment of mirror he encountered.

At school, he professed a worship of the infirmary that earned him several hundred penances.

As a young man he replaced the beer and absinthe dear to his companions with mallow-flower and hot lemonade.

With the result that at thirty-five, you would have thought that he was sixty, if hazard had led you to encounter him walking slowly along the streets in his triple envelope of muffler, overcoat and flannel vest.

Fortunately for him, Monsieur Argan was rich, which furnished him with the means to devote himself to his fatal monomania. He was even rich enough, thanks to his father, prosperous in commerce, to be able to reject the latter's name—which he did not fail to do.

The law regarding noble titles had not yet been invented and he was permitted, in all security, to elevate himself with a *particule*.

There again his irresistible and hereditary predestination revealed itself in spite of him. At first he improvised Argan Du Tilleul, then simply Du Tilleul. Du Tilleul—so reminiscent of tisanes!⁶

But wealth and nobility were not sufficient to secure the unfortunate's happiness. His life was populated by anxieties.

Sometimes it was the liver, sometimes the spleen, sometimes the heart, sometimes the lungs, sometimes... As a matter of sanitary precaution, he had not even dared to get married.

That is not all.

Argan, his ancestor, at least professed a boundless veneration for the men of the art: a blind credulity, a fetishism that admitted no verification—and although that faith did not save him, it always sustained him in his ordeals.

His offspring, on the contrary, added to all the diseases he thought he had one that he really had: the disease of doubt.

He wanted and did not want; he was avid for prescriptions, but when the prescriptions were drawn up, he set about querying them, interpreting them and discussing them, forgetting that medicine is a dogma that affirms but does not prove.

⁵ The doctors in *La Malade imaginaire* deliver their judgments in Latin, in one key scene singing in chorus, as if parodying the Latin mass: "*Bene, bene, bene, respondere/Dignus, dignus est intrare/In nostro docto corpore.*" [Very, very, very well answered/worthy, worthy is it to enter into our learned corporation.]

⁶ Tilleul was (and still is) the name given to a very popular herbal tea made from an infusion of the flowers of the linden or lime tree, strongly recommended by its admirers as a cure for headaches.

In such a situation, imagine what mortal misery Monsieur Argan Du Tilleul must have found in every day of his existence.

II. A Supernatural Friend

One of those days—which was actually a night—Onésime Du Tilleul (his name was Onésime) was lying down, plunged in a profound depression.

A sedative potion had had no effect.

The hours went by, populated with insomnias that he attributed successively to the most redoubtable causes; his lassitude was extreme. Leaning his somnolent head in the hollow of one of his hands, and mechanically rotating a spoon with the other in a cup placed beside the tremulous night-light, the saddened bachelor was pensive.

A noise suddenly attracted his attention.

It was the door of his bedroom opening—and an individual of vaguely fantastic aspect appeared in the doorway.

The individual was totally unknown to Onésime, whose mouth was already open to ask him a perfectly natural question when the stranger got in ahead of the enquiry.

“Please excuse me, Monsieur Argan...”

“Du Tilleul,” objected Onésime, shocked,

“Argan Du Tilleul, so be it, if you insist. You’re nonetheless the descendant of the late Argan who married for a second time to Dame Béline. From that union was born...”

“I have no need for this genealogical instruction,” said Onésime, interrupting again.

“That’s true—I only wanted to prove to you that, although I’m unknown to you, I at least have the honor of being perfectly familiar with you and yours.”

“What does that matter to me?”

“It will probably matter soon. You’re ill, my dear Monsieur Arg...I mean, Du Tilleul.”

“Who told you that?”

“No one; I know it. You’re ill, or you believe that you are.”

“I am.”

“Granted—it’s a family conviction on your part. And at the precise moment when I came in, you were occupied in racking your brains to figure out what unexplored genre of medicine you might appeal to your aid.”

“Who are you, to be able to read my thoughts in that fashion?”

“A friend...whom you have never seen, but who is interested in you, and has resolved to come to your aid.”

“Do you belong to the Faculty?”

The unknown smiled in a slightly ironic fashion, and then continued, in his penetrating voice: “My name is Master Helleborus,⁷ but the sciences of the Earth are too petty for me to devote my precious time to them; it is to supernatural knowledge that I devote myself exclusively, and it is by supernatural methods that I shall bring about your cure.”

“But...”

“No need! I’ve read your response in your brain. You take me for a lunatic.”

The descendant of the *Malade Imaginaire* blushed slightly on seeing his thought so well-divined.

⁷ The plant *Helleborus niger* [black hellebore] had been widely employed since Classical times as a treatment for various diseases, especially mental illness, although the preparation most commonly used from the Middle Ages onwards, probably polluted with material from more dangerous related species, was notoriously toxic, inducing such symptoms as vertigo, raging thirst, bradycardia, a feeling of suffocation and, ultimately, cardiac arrest. In Christian folklore, it routinely featured in recipes for summoning demons, but it is also featured in a sentimental legend in which the plant sprouted from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to offer to the child Christ, for which reason it is sometimes known as the Christmas rose.

“That ought to prove to you,” the stranger went on, “that you will seek in vain to hide anything from me, and you’d do better to trust my word. So, I was telling you that I devote myself particularly to supernatural studies. I believe I can affirm to you that you have before you the foremost spiritualist in the universe. What, again! Now you’re thinking secretly that I’m charlatan?”

This time, a superstitious terror took possession of Onésime, who sensed all his thoughts escaping him in spite of himself. He remained silent while his bizarre interlocutor went on: “Pay close attention! The foremost spiritualist in the universe, not on Earth. The Earth, I repeat, is unworthy of the focus of my preoccupations. But the immensity of worlds! All the planets! Your astronomers make me laugh, when they allow themselves to be heaped with decorations and stuffed with rewards for some petty celestial body they’ve perceived by chance. I, who am speaking to you, know thirty-nine thousand seven hundred and seventy-one planets.”

That figure gave poor Du Tilleul goose-bumps.

“Thirty-nine thousand seven hundred and seventy-one with which I’m in regular communication. By the Inferno, that’s travel that forms the mind and the heart! And I’ve resolved to take you on just such a trip with me, my dear friend.”

“A voyage to the planets?”

“Horns of Beelzebub, how you go on! A thousand existences like yours wouldn’t be sufficient for that, and you’d be quite content, I imagine, to visit one alone: the one that bears the registration number 29,388, is forty-nine million leagues distant from this globe,⁸ and figures in the Atlas of Worlds under the name of Planet Fantasia.”

“My God, Monsieur,” stammered Onésime, “that would give me infinite pleasure, but nevertheless...”

“Don’t tell lies! Far from experiencing the slightest pleasure, you’re feeling the most violent terror, and dying to call for help. Argan Du Tilleul, old chap, you’re an ingrate, and you almost deserve to be abandoned to your paltry destiny...”

“I swear to you...”

“That you’re half-dead of fear. Well, damn it, it’s to prevent you from dying entirely that I’ve come. The example of our ancestor has done you no good, and you’re preparing, like him, to die, not of disease but of medicine. For once, as it happens, I’ll make an exception. The faculty of thought-reading of which I gave you proof a little while ago, you shall also possess during the voyage that we’re about to undertake. Try to show yourself worthy of it and able to profit from it.

“Planet Fantasia will offer you, especially with regard to the subject that interests you, material for the most curious observations. Don’t let them go to waste. Furthermore, I’ll be there to keep watch, and underline the moral of the fable for you when your sight is too feeble to discover it. Are you ready?”

“What! To depart just like that, without making preparations of any sort?”

“Not even a will to write. We’re not taking a railway train. No, I have a faster and less perilous means of locomotion.”

“At least let me bring a few boxes of pills without which...”

“You’ll find pills there, and more people to sugar-coat them for you than you could ever wish. Planet Fantasia has a medical and pharmaceutical reputation that isn’t stolen, I can assure you. Let’s go, my dear, let’s go...still a residue of mistrust? Let’s go—it will pass on the way.

“One, two, three...!”

So saying, Master Helleborus touched Onésime lightly with his fingertip.

III. Direct Transit

⁸ i.e. 196,000,000 kilometers—which would place “Planet Fantasia” somewhere in the “asteroid belt” among the minor planets of the solar system.

As soon as the contact occurred, it seemed to Onésime that his body became lighter than a feather, and that, like a balloon inflated with gas, he began to leave the ground and rise toward the ceiling.

But it was another matter when he felt the stranger's hand push him through the window that he had just opened.

At first, expecting to be precipitated on to the cobblestones of his courtyard, he wanted to shout "Help!"

"Don't shout," commanded his mysterious guide, with a snigger. "You won't fall. Far from it!"

And, indeed, once through the window, Onésime perceived that his body was continuing its ascensional movement.

Without being supported by anything, he rose up, and up, and up.

They passed the second story.

"A woman charming the leisure left to her by her husband's absence," said Du Tilleul's fantastic companion, showing him two shadows projected on the curtains of the casement by the light of a candle.

They passed the third, where a man was sitting up late in front of a strong-box.

"A usurer doing his accounts," said the cicerone.

They passed the fourth: "A poet searching for a rhyme!"

They passed the fifth: "Domestics busy drinking their masters' wine!"

"Sapristi!" Onésime exclaimed. "I recognize my groom!"

"Ha ha! Your peregrination is teaching you something from the very beginning, you see. Pay attention! We're off now!"

The rapidity with which the two travelers were rising had become vertiginous. It was a movement without jolts, but irresistible. The ground had already disappeared, and they were above the region of the clouds. On the other hand, the moon, with which the descendant of the *Malade Imaginaire* had only ever made the acquaintance through the intermediary of the telescope on the Pont-Neuf, appeared to him in monstrous proportions.

"I feel sick," murmured the unfortunate Du Tilleul.

"We'll take care of that later."

"The moonlight is blinding me."

"You'll get used to it—you'll see many others."

"I have a headache and I'm short of breath."

"When I tell you that I'm taking you to a place where you can consult at your ease regarding every ailment...come on! We're not making progress! Go faster!"

"We're not making progress! What a joke!"

At the moment when his companion addressed that reproach to him, Onésime estimated that he was rising at a velocity of about a thousand meters a minute. As the latter placed a finger on his breast, however, he suddenly experienced a complete relief, and ceased to feel the slightest suffocation, although the speed increased even more considerably.

"Confess that this is an excursion you didn't expect," his guide continued, chatting as casually as if they were sitting by the fireside in a peaceful drawing room. "It's said that a change of air is excellent for valetudinarians. You are, I think, served admirably! Do you see that star over there to the right? That's Sirius. Over there is Venus...further away, Jupiter... Change course slightly in order not to pass through Saturn's rings... That body which is moving to your left with such strange impetuosity is a great comet, which will soon be in the vicinity of the Earth..."

"What? You're objecting that the Observatory hasn't said anything about it yet. When have you ever known the Observatory announce anything until six months afterwards?"

"I won't make you a list of the fixed stars, much less those planets—between now and when they've all been baptized, as you can imagine, our scholars will have time to use up all the names in their vocabularies..."

"Look out! You nearly bumped into one of those vagabonds, traveling with a velocity equal to that of a cannonball multiplied by a hundred thousand...you could have sustained a bruise..."

“Are you going to start trembling again? What I’m telling you is a matter of alleviating the tedium of the journey with a few innocent jokes...damn it! It’s a matter of not chatting so much that we overshoot our station. ‘Passengers for Planet Fantasia!’ as the employees of our railways might shout! Stop there, Monsieur Argan!”

“Du Tilleul!” whispered the unfortunate, very quietly, having not dared to unclench his teeth throughout that monologue.

“Du Tilleul, so be it! That’s no reason to overshoot the target. Stop, then!”

At the same time, Helleborus’ hand fell upon Onésime’s shoulder.

The shock was so violent that it seemed to the latter than he had been pulverized into a thousand smithereens. Closing his eyes and extending his arms, he sighed: “I’m dead!”

“Not at all! You’ve simply arrived, and I’m gallantly offering you my hand to help you down from the carriage!”

IV. Planet Fantasia

That last joke was not even perceived by Du Tilleul. He had lost consciousness.

When he came round, his cicerone was gravely administering a few little flicks to his nose and whistling a dance tune.

“Where am I?” he stammered.

“At the destination, damn it!”

The terrestrial voyager felt himself, to assure himself that he was intact.

“Did you think that you were going to be killed? Don’t worry. None of your limbs has missed roll call. Our troll is over; you’re resting on one of the benches of one of the pathways of one of the promenades of one of the quarters of the capital of Planet Fantasia. Oof!”

“We’re really on the Planet Fantasia?”

“As really as you could wish. To convince you, deign to take the trouble of accompanying me to the summit of that nearby eminence. From there one can see in its entirety the immense city into which we’re about to go.”

One would think we were on the Buttes Montmartre, thought Onésime.

“That analogy isn’t the only one you’ll have occasion to remark. Planet Fantasia is, in effect, nothing but a kind of second Earth, seen through a magnifying glass. All the faults, all the vices, and all the vicissitudes of the world in which you’re accustomed to living are found here, increased and exaggerated.”

“Really?”

“Really; and that’s what will comprise the principal utility of your voyage. Look!”

The two excursionists had reached the plateau that overlooked the capital of the planet.

A gigantic city extended at their feet, raising up into the air its thousands of steeples, roofs, domes, lightning-conductors, columns, triumphal arches, obelisks and factory chimneys.

“One might think that it was Paris,” Du Tilleul murmured.

“The resemblance continues, as I warned you. Permit me to give you a few summary indications that will help you to orientate yourself in future.

“Do you see that area bristling with enormous chimneys, which are vomiting clouds of black smoke? That’s the Workers’ Quarter. There are a thousand laborers of every sort there, who use up their strength and their lives in the most crushing toil, and sometimes the most murderous. Most of them hardly earn enough to feed themselves. Their employers are sometimes millionaires.

“The fronton on the horizon is the center of the Speculator’s Quarter. It’s there that people gamble on the sale of bonds and shares. In general, one counts, in a good year or a bad one, three thousand honest men who ruin themselves in that recreation. On the other hand, the number of pickpockets who get rich there is less than half that.

“Do you see that dome? That’s the center of the Literate Quarter. Forty individuals of the male sex have the mission of representing the literary intelligence of Planet Fantasia there, so those forty

individuals are uniformly chosen from among men of the world, churchmen, advocates, military men, aristocrats, mathematicians and statesmen. There's talk of introducing at the next elections a manufacturer of woolen shawls who has made colossal profits in that game and who hosts superb balls. What one never sees there, of course, is a simple man of letters. One member who risked putting forward the name of talented writer two years ago was nearly lynched by his colleagues.

"Further away, that block of new buildings is the Quarter of Occasional Amours. It has become customary no longer to obtain provisions anywhere else, unless one addresses oneself, a kilometer further away, to the Quarter of Marriages Made to Measure. In the Quarter of Occasional Amours one does not love and one pays. In the Quarter of Marriages Made to Measure one does not love, and one is paid. That's the difference. Men ordinarily come to spend in the former, with Mesdemoiselles of the left hand, the dowries that they demand in the latter from Mesdames of the right hand."

"But that's just like Paris," said Onésime.

"In the capital of Planet Fantasia, everything is sacrificed to appearances: splendid houses make one believe that the residents are rentiers by right of birth, but there are no tenants in the houses, or tenants who eat pieces of cheese in their gilded dining-rooms; formidable rents, which aren't paid when the settlement is due; trinkets, but no comfort.

"Finally, as statistics details worthy of your interest, I will add:

"That in the capital of Planet Fantasia thirty thousand graduates are manufactured every year who have no employment, but who all replace that desideratum with the pretention of becoming, while still in their prime, Ministers or Great Men;

"That there are thirty-nine thousand sewers infinitely cleaner than the hovels of a host of poor people;

"That forty-one leagues of boulevards have been pierced since the last triennial census, even though thirty-five leagues of old boulevards are absolutely devoid of any construction;

"That playwrights number twenty-eight thousand three hundred there, only thirty-four of whom have succeeded in having plays staged during the last ten years, thirty-two of whom only figure in the list for a single act, the other two having furnished various theaters by themselves with eight hundred and eleven plays;

"And that, finally, of all the individuals arrested for vagrancy and questioned regarding their profession, there was not one who did not reply, imperturbably: 'I'm a photographer.'"

"Still just like Paris!" exclaimed Onésime, for the fourth time

Master Helleborus did not seem to pay any heed to the exclamation. "Now that you possess the most indispensable indications," he concluded, "adjust your clothing slightly, for everyone here is judged by external appearances. Keep your hands prudently in your pockets, because purses, like young daughters, cannot be too well-guarded. Finally, adopt a slightly insolent expression, because that will prevent other people from adopting one with you.

"As for the local language...just a second..." He passed his hand over Onésime's forehead. "Now you know it as if you had never spoken any other. We can now go into Capital Fantasia."