

THE TWO INNS.

Translated from the French of Alphonse Daudet.

Returning from Nîmes one sultry July day, I trudged along a scorching white road, with never a sign of shade or a breath of wind until I came to a group of white houses at what is called the relay of St. Vincent. On the outskirts of the little hamlet were two large inns staring at each other from opposite sides of the road.

There was something striking in the proximity of those two inns. On one side, a large new building, full of life and animation, all the doors thrown open, the diligence stopping in front, the steaming horses being unharnessed, the passengers drinking hastily on the road, in the short shadow of the walls; the courtyard crowded with mules and vehicles; carters lying under the sheds, awaiting the cool of the evening. Within, outcries, oaths, blows of fists on the tables, the clinking of glasses, the clicking of billiard balls, the popping of corks, and above all that uproar, a jovial, ringing voice, singing so loud that the windows shook:

"Pretty little Margoton,
As soon as dawn was waking,
Took her silver pitcher,
And went off to the well."

The inn opposite, on the contrary, was silent and seemed deserted. Grass under the gateway, shutters broken, over the door a rusty twig of holly hanging like an old plume, the door-step strewn with stones from the road. It was all so poverty-stricken, so pitiful, that it seemed an act of charity to stop there and drink a glass.

On entering, I found a long room, deserted and dismal, which the dazzling light, entering through three curtainless windows, rendered even more dismal and deserted. A few rickety tables, on which stood broken glasses dull with rust, a dilapidated billiard table, holding out its four pockets as if asking alms, a yellow couch, an old desk, slumbered there in an oppressive and unhealthy heat. And the flies! flies everywhere! I had never seen so many; on the ceiling, clinging to the windows, in the glasses, in swarms. When I opened the door, there was a buzzing, a humming of wings, as if I were entering a hive.

At the end of the room, in a window recess, there was a woman standing close to the window, busily occupied in looking out. I called her twice:

"Ho there! hostess!"

She turned slowly, and showed me the face of a poverty-stricken peasant woman, wrinkled and furrowed, earth-colored, framed by long lappets of rusty lace, such as the old women in our neighborhood wear. She was not an old woman, though; but much weeping had faded her completely.

"What do you want?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

"To sit down a moment and drink something."

She gazed at me in amazement, without moving from her place, as if she did not understand me.

"Isn't this an inn?"

The woman sighed.

"Yes, it is an inn, if you choose. But why don't you go opposite, like all the rest? It is much more lively."

"It is too lively for me. I prefer to stay here with you."

And without waiting for her reply, I seated myself at the table.

When she was quite sure that I was speaking seriously, the hostess began to go and come with a busy air, opening doors, moving bottles, wiping glasses, and disturbing the flies. It was clear that a guest to wait upon was an important

event. At times the unhappy creature would stop and take her head in her hands, as if she despaired of ever accomplishing anything.

Then she went into the rear room; I heard her shaking great keys, fumbling with locks, looking into the bread box, blowing, dusting, washing plates. From time to time a deep sigh, a sob ill stifled.

After a quarter of an hour of this business, I had before me a plate of raisins, an old loaf of Beaucaire bread, as hard as sandstone, and a bottle of sour new wine.

"You are served," said the strange creature; and she turned back at once to make her talk.

"You don't often have people here, do you, my poor woman?"

"Oh, no! never any one, monsieur. When we were alone here, it was different; we had the relay, we provided hunt-dinners during the ducking-season, and carriages all the year round. But since our neighbors set up in business, we have lost everything. People prefer to go opposite. They consider it too dull here. It's a fact that the house isn't very pleasant. I am not good looking, I have fever and ague, and my two little girls are dead. Over yonder, on the contrary, they are laughing all the time. It is a woman from Arles who keeps the inn, a handsome woman with laces and three bands of gold beads round her neck. The driver of the diligence, who is her lover, takes it to her place. And then she has a lot of hussies for chambermaids, so that she gets lots of custom! She has all the young men from Bezouces, Redessan, and Jonquieres.

The carters go out of their way to pass her house. And I stay here all day without a soul, eating my heart out."

She said this in a distraught, indifferent tone, with her forehead still resting against the glass. There was evidently something which interested her at the inn opposite.

Suddenly, on the other side of the road, there was a great commotion. The diligence moved off through the dust. I heard the cracking of the whip, the postillion's bugle, and the girls who had run to the door calling out:

"Adiousias! adiousias!" And over it all the stentorian voice that I had heard before, beginning again, louder than ever:

"She took her silver pitcher,
And went off to the well;
From there she could not see
Three soldiers drawing near."

At that voice the hostess trembled in every limb, and, turning to me, she said in an undertone:

"Do you hear? That's my husband. Doesn't he sing well?"

I gazed at her in stupefaction.

"What? Your husband? Do you mean to say that he goes there too?"

Thereupon, with a heart-broken air, but with the utmost gentleness, she replied:

"What can you expect, monsieur? Men are made that way; they don't like to see people cry; and then this great barrack, where nobody

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