

The Sun and the Rain

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When he awoke in Chartres he was filled with a numb excitement. It was a grey wintry day with snow in the air, and he expected something to happen. He had this feeling often in the country, in France: it was a strange, mixed feeling of desolation and homelessness, of wondering with a ghostly emptiness why he was there--and of joy, and hope, and expectancy, without knowing what it was he was going to find.

In the afternoon he went down to the station and took a train that was going to Orléans. He did not know where Orléans was. The train was a mixed train, made up of goods cars and passenger compartments. He bought a third-class ticket and got into one of the compartments. Then the shrill little whistle blew, and the train rattled out of Chartres into the countryside, in the abrupt and casual way a little French train has, and which was disquieting to him.

There was a light mask of snow on the fields and the air was smoky: the whole earth seemed to smoke and steam, and from the windows of the train one could see the wet earth and the striped, cultivated pattern of the fields, and, now and then, some farm buildings. It did not look like America: the land looked fat and well kept, and even the smoky wintry woods had this well-kept appearance. Far off sometimes one could see tall lines of poplars and knew that there was water there.

In the compartment he found three people--an old peasant and his wife and daughter. The old peasant had sprouting moustaches, a seamed and weather-beaten face, and small rheumy-looking eyes. His hands had a rock-like heaviness and solidity, and he kept them clasped upon his knees. His wife's face was smooth and brown, there were fine webs of wrinkles around her eyes, and her face was like an old brown bowl. The daughter had a dark sullen face and sat away from them next the window as if she was ashamed of them. From time to time when they spoke to her she would answer them in an infuriated kind of voice without looking at them.

The peasant began to speak amiably to him when he entered the compartment. He smiled and grinned back at the man, although he did not understand a word he was saying, and the peasant kept on talking then, thinking he understood.

The peasant took from his coat a package of the cheap, powerful tobacco--the 'bleu-- which the French government provides for a few cents for the poor, and prepared to stuff his pipe. The young man pulled a package of American cigarettes from his pocket and offered them to the peasant.

"Will you have one?"

"My faith, yes!" said the peasant.

He took a cigarette clumsily from the package and held it between his great, stiff fingers, then he held it to the flame the young man offered, puffing at it in an unaccustomed way. Then he fell to examining it curiously, revolving it in his hands to read the label. He

turned to his wife, who had followed every movement of this simple transaction with the glittering intent eyes of an animal, and began a rapid and excited discussion with her.

"It's American--this."

"Is it good?"

"My faith, yes--it's of good quality."

"Here, let me see! What does it call itself?"

They stared dumbly at the label.

"What do you call this?" said the peasant to the young man.

"Licky Streek," said the youth, dutifully phonetical.

"L-l-leek-ee--?" they stared doubtfully. "What does that wish to say, in French?"

"Je ne sais pas," he answered.

"Where are you going?" the peasant said, staring at the youth with rheumy little eyes of fascinated curiosity.

"Orléans."

"How?" the peasant asked, with a puzzled look on his face.

"Orléans."

"I do not understand," the peasant said.

"Orléans! Orléans!" the girl shouted in a furious tone. "The gentleman says he is going to Orléans."

"Ah!" the peasant cried, with an air of sudden illumination. "Orléans!"

It seemed to the youth that he had said the word just the same way the peasant said it, but he repeated it.

"Yes, Orléans."

"He is going to Orléans," the peasant said, turning to his wife.

"Ah-h!" she cried knowingly, with a great air of illumination, then both fell silent, and began to stare at the youth with curious, puzzled eyes again.

"What region are you from?" the peasant asked presently, still intent and puzzled, staring at him with his small eyes.

"How's that? I don't understand."

"I say--what region are you from?"

"The gentleman is not French!" the girl shouted furiously, as if exasperated by their stupidity. "He is a foreigner. Can't you see that?"

"Ah-h!" the peasant cried, after a moment, with an air of astounded enlightenment. Then, turning to his wife, he said briefly, "He is not French. He is a stranger."

"Ah-h!"

And then they both turned their small, round eyes on him and regarded him with a fixed, animal-like curiosity.

"From what country are you?" the peasant asked presently. "What are you?"

"I am an American."

"Ah-h! An American. . . . He is an American," he said, turning to his wife.

"Ah-h!"

The girl made an impatient movement and continued to stare furiously and sullenly out of the window.

Then the peasant, with the intent, puzzled curiosity of an animal began to examine his companion carefully from head to foot. He looked at his shoes, his clothes, his overcoat,

and finally lifted his eyes in an intent and curious stare to the young man's valise on the rack above his head. He nudged his wife and pointed to the valise.

"That's good stuff, eh?" he said in a low voice. "It's real leather."

"Yes, it's good, that."

And both of them looked at the valise for some time and then turned their curious gaze upon the youth again. He offered the peasant another cigarette, and the old man took one, thanking him.

"It's very fine, this," he said, indicating the cigarette. "That costs dear, eh?"

"Ah-h! . . . That's very dear," and he began to look at the cigarette with increased respect.

"Why are you going to Orléans?" he asked presently. "Do you know someone there?"

"No, I am just going there to see the town."

"How?" the peasant blinked at him stupidly, uncomprehendingly. "You have business there?"

"No. I am going just to visit--to see the place."

"How?" the peasant said stupidly in a moment, looking at him. "I do not understand."

"The gentleman says he is going to see the town," the girl broke in furiously. "Can't you understand anything?"

"I do not understand what he is saying," the old man said to her. "He does not speak French."

"He speaks very well," the girl said angrily. "I understand him very well. It is you who are stupid--that's all."

The peasant was silent for some time now, puffing at his cigarette, and looking at the young man with friendly, puzzled eyes.

"America is very large--eh?" he said at length, making a wide gesture with his hands.

"Yes, it is very large. Much larger than France."

"How?" the peasant said again with a puzzled, patient look. "I do not understand."

"He says America is much larger than France," the girl cried in an exasperated tone. "I understand all he says."

Then, for several minutes, there was an awkward silence: nothing was said. The peasant smoked his cigarette, seemed on the point of speaking several times, looked puzzled and said nothing. Outside, rain had begun to fall in long slanting lines across the fields, and beyond, in the grey blown sky, there was a milky radiance where the sun should be, as if it were trying to break through. When the peasant saw this, he brightened, and leaning forward to the young man in a friendly manner, he tapped him on the knee with one of his great, stiff fingers, and then pointing towards the sun, he said very slowly and distinctly, as one might instruct a child:

"Le so-leil."

And the young man obediently repeated the word as the peasant had said it:

"Le so-leil."

The old man and his wife beamed delightedly and nodded their approval, saying, "Yes. Yes. Good. Very good." Turning to his wife for confirmation, the old man said: "He said it very well, didn't he?"

"But, yes! It was perfect!"

Then, pointing to the rain, and making a down-slanting movement with his great hands, he said again, very slowly and patiently:

"La pluie."

"La pluie," the young man repeated dutifully, and the peasant nodded vigorously, saying: "Good, good. You are speaking very well. In a little time you will speak good French."

Then, pointing to the fields outside the train, he said gently:

"La terre."

"La terre," the young man answered.

"I tell you," the girl cried angrily from her seat by the window, "he knows all these words. He speaks French very well. You are too stupid to understand him--that's all."

The old man made no reply to her, but sat looking at the young man with a kind, approving face. Then, more rapidly than before, and in succession, he pointed to the sun, the rain, the earth, saying:

"Le soleil . . . la pluie . . . la terre."

The young man repeated the words after him, and the peasant nodded vigorously with satisfaction. Then, for a long time, no one spoke, there was no sound except for the uneven rickety-clack of the little train, and the girl continued to look sullenly out of the window. Outside, the rain fell across the fertile fields in long slanting lines.

Late in the afternoon the train stopped at a little station, and everyone rose to get out.

This was as far as the train went: to reach Orléans it was necessary to change to another train.

The peasant, his wife and his daughter collected their bundles and got out of the train. On another track another little train was waiting, and the peasant pointed to this with his great, stiff finger, and said to the young man:

"Orléans. That's your train there."

The youth thanked him, and gave the old man the remainder of the packet of cigarettes.

The peasant thanked him effusively and before they parted he again pointed rapidly towards the sun, the rain, and the earth, saying with a kind and friendly smile:

"Le soleil . . . la pluie . . . la terre."

And the young man nodded to show that he understood, repeated what the old man had said. And the peasant shook his head with vigorous approval, saying:

"Yes, yes. It's very good. You will learn fast."

At these words, the girl, who with the same sullen, aloof, and shamed look had walked on ahead of her parents, now turned and cried out in a furious and exasperated tone:

"I tell you, the gentleman knows all that! . . . Will you leave him alone now? . . . You are only making a fool of yourself!"

But the old man and old woman paid no attention to her, but stood looking at the young man, with a friendly smile, and shook hands warmly and cordially with him as he said good-bye.

Then he walked on across the tracks and got up into a compartment in the other train. When he looked out of the window again, the peasant and his wife were standing on the platform looking towards him with kind and eager looks on their old faces. When the peasant caught his eye, he pointed his great finger at the sun again, and called out:

"Le so-leil."

"Le so-leil," the young man answered.

"Yes! Yes!" the old man shouted, with a laugh. "It's very good."

Then the daughter looked toward the young man sullenly, gave a short and impatient laugh of exasperation, and turned angrily away. The train began to move then, but the old man and woman stood looking after him as long as they could. He waved to them, and the old man waved his great hand vigorously and, laughing, pointed towards the sun. And the young man nodded his head and shouted, to show that he had understood. Meanwhile, the girl had turned her back angrily and was walking away around the station.

Then they were lost from sight, the train swiftly left the little town behind, and now there was nothing but the fields, the earth, the smoky and mysterious distances. The rain fell steadily.