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2 Suzanne Voilquin

Recollections of a Daughter of the People

Voilquin's Recollections were written at the age of sixty-seven, as she looked back upon a life full of movement and change. Parisian born, she traveled the globe and lived abroad to an extent exceptional for a French citizen of her time, of her gender, and of her modest origins.

Though she can legitimately claim to be a daughter of the people, she was not of typical working-class background. Her father was a producer and small-time entrepreneur in the hat-making trade. He appears to have made a comfortable living until a combination of overconfidence, unwise business decisions, and cyclical downturns of the economy brought him to ruin. This and other texts in this anthology reveal that the experience of financial failure and debt were a remarkably common feature of nineteenth-century life. Because of the reversals her family suffered, Voilquin gradually slipped into the working class, and by her midtwenties she was forced to take jobs with small firms producing embroidered goods. Her career as a manual worker was only temporary, however, and after 1837 she earned her livelihood for the most part as a certified midwife.

The passages collected here tell not only her own life story but that of her parents as well, especially through the revelations that Suzanne's mother made during the long bout with cancer that would eventually lead to her death. These excerpts, drawn entirely from the first five chapters of Voilquin's forty-chapter autobiography, focus on her family and occupational life to the age of thirty-four. Her memoirs were written in 1865 and published in France in 1866.

SKETCH OF THE FIRST TWELVE YEARS OF MY LIFE

If you are to understand my life, dear child,¹ I will need to take a few pages to explain my early years, for the past begets the future; logic makes it so.

1. Voilquin's memoir is addressed to her niece and namesake, the child of her deceased brother, whom she refers to in her dedication as her "adopted daughter."

In thinking back on that bygone era, the first thing I become aware of is the gentle countenance of your forebear, my beloved mother. Though she has been dead for more than forty years, she remains as living in me as at the moment of our separation. It was due to her that the years of my youth were devoted to the impassioned practice of Christian worship.

My father, though very much a revolutionary, left our moral upbringing to her, smiling at our extreme devotion and treating it as one of those childhood illnesses without serious consequence for the future.

My mother, who had a big heart but whose intellect had been sharply diminished by her education, never disputed anything the Church laid down. She believed it all, and I followed her example. In my eyes, nothing was as beautiful as the ceremonies of the Catholic Church. I cannot even remember at what age your father and I acquired the habit of going each day to our ancient church, Saint-Merri, to hear the first mass.² This mass, our mother told us, had a greater value for our souls than those that followed, for Father Malmaison, my future spiritual director, would intone in a tremulous voice the beautiful hymn *Pange lingua*, before giving the faithful the blessing of the Holy Sacrament. To attend in summertime, we had to get up at five in the morning. For two young chatterboxes, this was nothing more than a joyful promenade. You realize, of course, that in winter our mother's inspiration was a very powerful influence in getting us to leave our beds at six o'clock—that is to say, before daylight—to brave snow and ice to kneel on the cold and damp stone floor. But upon our return we would receive as our reward a very tender kiss and a bowl of very hot soup. The truth is that the first gave me at least as much pleasure as the second.

Continuing in the application of her ultrareligious system, my mother sent me to confession when I was about seven. The Church maintains that at that age the child is responsible. Your father, who was nearly ten years old, was told to introduce me to Father Malmaison. He was a chubby little man, quite plump, who was always smiling and giving children holy pictures and friendly little pats on the cheek, as a result of which they all liked him. He was my spiritual director for several years, even though my father could not stand him because of his ultramontane opinions.³ For,

2. The cloister of Saint-Merri is situated in the Marais district, just northwest of the Paris city hall and in the heart of a neighborhood which, throughout the nineteenth century, was a center of working-class militancy. The church itself was the site of the last stand of a group of republicans who led the unsuccessful insurrection of 1832.

3. The term *ultramontane* (literally "beyond the mountains," that is, the Alps), refers to those within the Catholic Church who believed in the doctrine of papal

although he was a good priest—or rather, because he was—Father Malmaison frequently thundered on about the revolution and revolutionaries in a way that was not terribly evangelical. At the time, all of that mattered very little to me. The parish adored him, and I followed the parish's example.

From the time I reached the age of seven, I would go to confession once every month. I admit that the difficulty of pulling together the elements of a suitable confession made this a somewhat distressing undertaking for me. I was a poor, small child with an unblemished conscience who never knew how to answer that formula, spoken in a sleepy tone: "What next, my child?" And so, one month when I found myself well stocked, I decided to save for my next confession one or two enormities like inattention in my prayers, the sin of gluttony, pilfering my mother's provisions, and so on. Pleased with my ingenious idea, I happily brought the balance sheet of my faults before my indulgent spiritual director, and the dreaded quarter hour went by quite satisfactorily.

In this same period, my mother was taking me to the convent of the Saint-Merri cloister, to the school run by the Sisters of Saint-Vincent. Nothing could have been more simplified than the program of study established in that holy abode. First we would pray, then sing hymns, listen to pious and humdrum admonishments, learn to read and write a bit, and on Saturday recite the day's gospel, which we had learned by heart.

These undemanding exercises were still too much for my memory, which had atrophied as the result of an accident the preceding year. One day, as I was deeply involved in playing with some other young girls, one of them—an older girl of ten—turned quickly, without letting go of the racket she was holding in her hand. Unfortunately, this plaything connected with my poor little six-year-old face and broke my nose. Blood spurted with such force that the neighbors did not dare take me up to my mother's for some hours.

This accident was of some gravity for both my body and my mind. I nearly lost my sight and only got rid of my intense headaches toward the age of eight. My mother, whose devotion was sometimes more sincere than enlightened and more concerned with the soul than the body, did not call a doctor, who might have been able, right at the outset and by ordinary means, to fix the broken nose. To the worldly, who would reproach her for it while they pitied me, she would say, "Bah! My daughter will always be

supremacy and looked to the Vatican for guidance. A spiritual director was a priest who assumed responsibility for advising an adolescent and guiding his or her moral and religious development.

pretty enough if she remains chaste and pious." She no doubt wanted to nip in the bud the sentiment of vanity that Sterne maintains is too vigorous to eradicate completely.⁴

So, as I said, it was as if my brain was partially paralyzed. Despite a strength of will uncommon in a child, my memory proved resistant to retaining the briefest sentence. My martyrdom would begin each Saturday morning. When it came my turn to recite the gospel, I might just as well have said, like Petit-Jean, "What I know best is the beginning."⁵ In fact, I cannot remember ever having gotten past the first line. So once I had said, "And at that time, Jesus said to his disciples . . .," I would suddenly stop. It was no use racking my poor and unfaithful memory, for I was incapable of finding in it what Jesus might have said to his disciples. At first I was reprimanded and punished, but in the end, at school and in my family, it was recognized that, as I was a pious and timid child, the cause of these failures to perform must lie beyond my control. I was then left to seek in peace the rest of the gentle and divine Jesus's symbolic exchanges with his apostles. [. . .]

MY FAMILY

When my mother brought her last child into the world, we were allowed, a few hours after the delivery, to go kiss the newborn. That is when my mother, in presenting me with this charming little creature, said to me, "It is not a sister that I am giving you but a daughter. From this moment on, she belongs to you." I was barely nine years old. The rather solemn gift of this tiny being, made before the entire family, brought me immense joy. I took it so seriously that from then on I just barely permitted my mother the right to nurse her. [. . .]

This precocious motherhood which, like all sentiments based on exclusivity, caused me both joy and sorrow, became a healthy stimulus in my youth and a source of nourishment for my soul. It was this intensely pure emotion that helped me understand the concept of duty. Still later, in very painful circumstances, it saved me from suicide by forcing me to live for this child. Thus, until her marriage, she never left me, whether for school or apprenticeship. And everything that the hard times of my youth allowed me to assimilate—which, alas, was all too little—I learned in order to share it with this dear adoptive daughter.

So there I was, having just concluded my childhood and beginning my

4. Volquin probably refers to the English writer Laurence Sterne (1713–68), best known as the author of *Tristram Shandy*.

5. Petit-Jean is a character in *Les Plaideurs*, the only comedy written by Jean Racine (1639–99).

youth under the influence of that painful era that witnessed our French nation diminished, her children dispersed by death and exile, immediately after she had been so great, so feared, under a hero acclaimed by the people.⁶

It is in the family setting that the nuances of children's characters are shaped. My mother, through her tenderness, held sway over the first years of my life, for my exaggerated devoutness was in part her handiwork. But my youth was grafted, so to speak, onto the strong will of my father, with his intelligent nature and openness to generous ideas. It is to him that I owe the first practical awareness of life in the broader sense.

You loved your kind grandfather and you were a witness, dear child, to his peaceful death, a year after our arrival in Louisiana.⁷ It was in our arms that the soul of this ardent patriot expired, without pain or agony. Until the age of eighty-four, this philosophical proletarian was never heard to complain of the fate that had constantly kept him in the lower ranks of society, despite his courage and the extraordinary efforts he made to escape. Continue then, my child, to revere his memory. Place flowers on his grave, which must, alas, remain on foreign soil, far from the France he loved so much.

Here is the place to say a few words about his youth. You are aware that before our great revolution, the right of primogeniture was part of our legal system and was imposed even in rural families.⁸ The oldest son alone enjoyed the privilege of learning to read and write. For this reason my father, who was the youngest son of a large peasant family, had to resign himself to tending the family flock. Later, when he was strong enough, he went to help his brothers labor in the fields, with only the great book of nature before his eyes to complete his education.

6. Though she does not provide exact dates in her text, Voilquin gives sufficient indications to establish that she was born in 1798 or soon after. This would make her about sixteen at the time of the fall of Napoléon and the First French Empire, which she describes in this passage.

7. In September 1848, Voilquin set out for the United States. She eventually settled in Louisiana, where her sister had gone fifteen years earlier. Voilquin had already lived extensively abroad, first as a member of a Saint-Simonian community established in Egypt (1833–36) and subsequently for seven years in Russia (1839–46), where she worked as a midwife. In the first half of the nineteenth century, her wide-ranging travels were highly unusual for any individual of humble origins, and particularly so for a woman.

8. Primogeniture is the legal requirement, dating from medieval times, that the eldest son inherit the entirety of his father's estate. It ensured that a family's agricultural holdings would not be split up into parcels too small to support a household. By extension, the term refers to the unequal distribution of property and privilege according to birth order.

When he was about eighteen, the love of independence stole him away from a life too calm for his constitution. The ideal of freedom, so much in the air at the end of the eighteenth century, attracted him and made him leave everything behind, his village and his family. First he went off to Nîmes, where he learned the trade of hatter.⁹ His goal was to complete his Tour of France.¹⁰ This complement of practical education was necessary in that period to round out the training of a competent *compagnon*.¹¹ I shall not undertake to tell you of his travels through the principal cities of France. I would only be repeating very badly what Perdiguier and George Sand have said so well in speaking of these rival brotherhoods.¹²

After several years, these excursions led young Mr. Monnier, my father, to Flanders, which he also traversed. But at last the little town of Malines brought his peregrinations to an end. There he met a young girl—rather pretty, gentle, timid, and devout—whom he made his wife and who became our worthy and pious mother.

Although of a sometimes exuberant nature, my father suffered the effects of his years of isolation. He had spent his first twelve years completely alone in his beautiful mountains of Vivarais, confronting the great scenes of nature. Often I saw him among us, plunged, as he put it so well, in infinite dreams and reveries that recalled to him that sweet period of his youth.

Our revolution, which came along to free the people by destroying all

9. Hatters (*chapeliers*) made headwear of all kinds; they worked primarily in felt, silk, wool, and fur. Hatters were skilled workers whose earnings exceeded the average daily wage of artisans in general. For a recent, detailed study of hatters in the period when Voilquin's father would have been learning his trade, see Michael Sonenscher, *The Hatters of Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1987).

10. The Tour of France was the journey made by novice craftsmen to complete their training, master the range of regional variations in the trade, and polish their personal skills. The tour generally consisted of a circuit of provincial towns that might take from one to several years to complete. See the introduction, pages 22 and 39 and chapter 3.

11. The term refers to a journeyman in a skilled trade who belonged to one of the workers' brotherhoods (*compagnonnages*) which flourished during the eighteenth century and survived with varying degrees of success into the nineteenth. The most important contemporary sources on the purpose, structure, and activities of these organizations are Agricol Perdiguier's *Le Livre du compagnonnage* (Marseille, 1878) and his *Memoirs of a Compagnon*, which is excerpted in chapter 3.

12. George Sand was the pseudonym of Aurore Dupin, the Baroness Dudevant (1804–76), who published a number of popular and influential romantic novels in the mid-nineteenth century. She was, moreover, a woman of strong political conviction who took an active role in the social issues of her day. Among her works dealing with the life of the working class was one entitled *Le Compagnon du tour de France* (Paris, 1861), inspired in part through her acquaintance with Agricol Perdiguier.

outdated and corrupt practices, found my father in the prime of life and happy to see the privileges of masters and feudal rights of every sort fall along with the Bastille.¹³ He came to Paris with his wife and two sons. The time for studying was past, for he had to see to the needs of his young family. The youthful Raymond Monnier therefore remained, to his great regret, in his original state of ignorance. Even had his financial means permitted, moreover, how would he have found the time to study in the course of those exciting years? It was for everyone a time of action. The yearning for social intercourse was so intense that individuality was forgotten in favor of collective life.

Oh, to be sure, to take part in the different stages of a social renovation (at times, alas, quite grim but always grand in its objectives), to devote one's free time to attending political clubs, to fraternize every *décadi* with warm and energetic comrades—all this was far more involving and spoke more to the heart than all the books in the world.¹⁴

The popular festivals on the Champ de Mars were a powerful stimulant for my father.¹⁵ How enthusiastically he would run to them, holding his oldest son by the hand and carrying the youngest on his robust shoulders! In his view, this initiation would make them true and ardent patriots.

My gentle mother was, in every way, the opposite of her husband. Timid and fearful before the emotion and uproar of social life, whose principles moreover offended all her religious beliefs, she effaced herself in complete self-sacrifice. In order to reconcile her feelings and her responsibilities, she made herself silent and submissive. She was, in a word, the Christian spouse of the Middle Ages. Raised in a small town by an inflexible and unresponsive mother, she came to marriage with her spirit numbed by the most complete ignorance of all matters, practical as well as intellectual. For this reason, she had vague aspirations but no initiative. Given the way circumstance had formed her, this Christian mother was hardly prepared to see to our intellectual development, but I always saw her towering above all others by virtue of her courage. It was the radiance of her angelic goodness that constantly illuminated the difficult path that I had to travel and that kept my heart from freezing as a result of contact with the egoism and false friendships of worldly life. [. . .]

13. The effects of the French Revolution on workers' rights is discussed in the introduction, pages 13–14.

14. The republican calendar, in force from 1792 to 1805, had a ten-day week. *Décadi* was the tenth day, the day of rest and relaxation.

15. Voilquin refers to the festivals held in celebration of the spirit and achievements of the Revolution. Perhaps the most famous were those dedicated to the Cult of the Supreme Being, which tried to substitute for traditional Catholicism a secularized form of worship organized around revolutionary principles.

When I was about fifteen, my character underwent spontaneous development. That love of independence and feminine dignity which constantly manifested itself was by no means inspired in me by the theories of Saint-Simon.¹⁶ No, it was part of my being. Let me cite just one example. One day, my father addressed a few brusque and disdainful words to his wife on the subject of religion. This made my brothers smile. I was outraged. "The truth is," I said to my mother, shedding a tear of anger, "you are altogether too patient. Dear mother, why do you let yourself be treated this way?"

"Ah, my daughter, peace is worth its weight in gold."

"Then it costs too much," I said defiantly.

"Oh, my little logician, never forget this proverb: The goat must browse where it is tethered."

But there was no holding me back, and I boldly replied: "No, no, the goat can break its tether and go browse somewhere else."

Although I could not sense its full significance, my mother was frightened by this rejoinder on the part of a child of fifteen. She made me be silent and forced me to go give my father a kiss.

From the time of this altercation, our roles changed. My mother relied on me to demand respect for her gentle and weak nature, and often my intervention served to reestablish the sometimes troubled moral equilibrium between her sons and her husband.

From that time on, I sensed the human spirit coming to life in me and transforming my mind, which had too long been choked by the mysticism of my childhood years. My personality became gay and extroverted. Everything attracted my interest and assumed a cheerful aspect in my eyes. But as my parents occupied an extremely lowly rank in society, I remained, despite my aspirations toward the beautiful, a poor child of the people, quite naive and quite ignorant.

I was not the only one, to be sure, who cried out to God: "Supreme

16. From the time of her initiation in 1830, Suzanne Voilquin was a lifelong devotee of the circle of Saint-Simonians initially led by Prosper "Father" Enfantin, and the bulk of her autobiography is concerned with her experiences as a member of this group. Claude-Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825) was a key originator of the divergent traditions of French socialism and positivism. A colorful figure who had fought in the American War of Independence, he proposed a scheme to join the Atlantic and Pacific oceans with a Central American canal. Saint-Simon amassed an early fortune, only to die in poverty after exhausting his resources in support of his many experimental ideas. He was also a prolific, if unsystematic, writer; but his ideas attracted a broad audience only after his death. His philosophy, in addition to its emphasis on meritocracy, the equality of the sexes, and the preeminent role of science, also stressed the need for society and organized groups of producers to assume responsibility for directing economic affairs.

intelligence, give me nourishment for my mind, for, alas, my parents can barely give me bread for my body."

Within the restricted circle in which I lived, if an unknown word happened to strike my ear, I would quickly resort to my brother's dictionary in order to learn its meaning and be able to assimilate it. Many times in public concerts and in museums, I would feel my tears flow. In these tears were mixed the joy of aspiring to the unknown and despair at never being able to attain it. "Oh how very fortunate," I would say, "are the children of the rich who can wander at their leisure through this immense garden of human knowledge and pick the fruits of these sacred trees!"

Thank God that our era wants to bring an end to pariah status of whatever sort. The inner pangs of ignorance, aspiring to the life of the intellect, will soon disappear. This century will not reach its conclusion before the last of the children of the people are placed in a position to develop their native talents. Before long, the right of all to receive this opportunity free of charge, and the duty on the part of every government to provide it, will be recognized.

My desire to learn received some satisfaction within my family. Philippe, my younger brother, had wanted, in the period of our extreme devoutness, to become a priest. With that intention, he had taken classes at the seminary of Saint-Merri until the age of seventeen. He then threw away his frock, telling my mother, to console her, that he would rather be an honest worker than a mediocre priest. This young scholar, who never got beyond the initial steps toward the priesthood, was therefore the best-educated member of the family. It was he who initiated me into Greek and Roman history and a bit of contemporary history as well. There before me was the path, but I lacked the time and books to follow it.

I loved reading with a passion. I was allowed to surrender to this enthusiasm each evening in my mother's company on condition that I read to her, while she worked, the entire stock of the neighborhood lending library. In place of that solid instruction that young girls are now beginning to receive, I would draw upon novels for false notions about real life.

When I was able to reflect back on the singular course in literature that I took each evening in my pious mother's presence, I was rather amazed. I could only explain this apparent contradiction on her part by ascribing it to her mixed nature, half Flemish, half Spanish—which is to say, ignorant of worldly affairs and living only through the heart and the imagination. What is more, following her example, this mixture of the sacred and profane proved just as perfectly compatible in my own mind.

Although the events that brought an end to the First Empire have passed into the realm of history and have been described by fair-minded men, I cannot pass over this period entirely in silence, for, I repeat, it is of my

moral being that I am writing. Though I was then a young girl, such shocks leave behind a lasting impression in one's mind and necessarily change one's thinking.

As this change of dynasty neared, agitation overcame all ranks and all ages. As my father's official reader, I would recite aloud the reports from Napoléon's army. Like him, I was deeply affected by our triumphs and our reverses. Because of my shyness, this further initiation as reader did not make me a grandiloquent orator, but from that time on, I knew in my heart what patriotism meant!

I lived among the people and I shared their feelings. Like them, all the love that I felt for France led me to detest all those who took any part in her humiliation. Thus, in 1815, when the time came for everyone to fight for her independence, it was with pride in accomplishing a sacred and indispensable duty that I embraced my father and older brother, who were both going off to the gates of Paris. My father joined the ranks of the National Guard, and my brother was a member of the Patriotic Federation of the Suburbs. As for my brother Philippe, he had belonged for several months to the army of the Loire.

That cruel day that saw the misfortune of France fulfilled will never be erased from my memory. It seemed interminable to us. The enemy was there at our gates. Each blast of the cannon that he fired at our defenders might deprive us of a loved one. At last, toward evening, our two patriots returned, black with powder stains, weary, discouraged, and furious. My father cursed the faint-heartedness of the Regency Council and all those traitors who were responsible for defending us but had just handed over France by surrendering Paris to the foreigners. "Oh," he said, "if Napoléon had been there to lead us, no enemy soldier would ever have seen his savage native land again." His words echoed the sentiments of the immense majority. I was in a position to testify to that fact after my mother and I made our way through the populous quarters, for our mounting anxiety pushed us here and there in search of news. I assure you that in that supreme hour, no woman held back her husband or her son. Yes, the people of Paris, for their part, wished to defend their capital. [. . .]

The years following the Restoration were terribly distressing for workers to live through. Poverty, our longtime acquaintance, came once again to knock at our door. This woeful visitor weighed above all on my mother who, out of devotion for her family, shouldered the greater part of the burden. Moreover, her health changed from that moment on, and the terrible disease from which she would die three years later began its ravages, though not the slightest complaint on her part occurred to awaken our concern.

When, one day, education is offered on an equal basis to both sexes, and

women with an aptitude for studies will compete, like men, to earn a doctor's diploma, how many female victims will be saved from a cruel and premature death! They will not wait, as my mother did, until the last stages of this terrible disease before entrusting themselves to science. During the long years that I practiced my profession, I was constantly in a position to observe that women hesitate to speak of certain symptoms.¹⁷ Everything in them rebels at the thought of revealing to a doctor those details that offend their imagination and modesty. *All* conceal the seriousness of their symptoms or mention them too late. In Russia, where I practiced my profession for seven years, I observed how little well-to-do women would allow themselves to be questioned by their doctor. There, as in Egypt and America, he must guess everything, while the terrible cancer has already left its imprint on its victim's features, and inexorable death prepares to seize her.

To women, and *only* to women, belongs the right to assist the members of their sex, not only in the admirable work of maternity but also in all those illnesses from which chastity suffers so much when they must be divulged to a man.

But enough of that for the moment. This important matter of our rights and our responsibilities in society cannot be treated incidentally. Let us return to my mother who, for three years, concealed the first symptoms of her illness. During those years of remission, when the disease seemed to be arrested—for its advance is that insidious—my mother had the joy of seeing the marriages of her two sons, the elder's in 1818 and the younger's in the following year. The modest dowry of Philippe's wife permitted him to become his father's partner. Good cheer and liveliness reappeared along with work, but this period of serenity and hope did not last long. For my family it was a calm between two storms.

MY MOTHER'S ILLNESS AND DEATH

After thirteen months of marriage, Philippe lost his young bride in childbirth, and I lost a devoted friend and sister! I had no time to dwell on this sorrow, for my mother, already very ill at the time of this catastrophe, immediately had to take to her bed. I went to get Mr. Lacour, our venerable old doctor. My impatience made his visit with my poor mother seem very long. After this consultation, I ran toward him, uneasy, wishing to know if the patient's condition presented a serious danger. "Yes, my child, your mother has a fatal illness that she has kept hidden too long. She is dying of cancer that has reached an advanced stage," he told me brusquely. On

17. Voilquin was certified as a midwife in 1837.