

BEAT UP THE POOR

FOR FIFTEEN days I had shut myself up in my room and had surrounded myself with the most popular books of the day (that was sixteen or seventeen years ago); I am speaking of books that treat of the art of making people happy, wise, and rich in twenty-four hours. I had digested — or rather swallowed — all the lucubrations of all the purveyors of public happiness — of those who advise the poor to become slaves, and of those who encourage them to believe that they are all dethroned kings. It will be readily understood that I was in a dazed state of mind bordering on idiocy.

Nevertheless I seemed to be conscious of an obscure germ of an idea buried deep in my mind, far superior to the whole catalogue of old wives' remedies I had so recently scanned. But it was still only the idea of an idea, something infinitely vague.

And I left my room with a terrible thirst. The passion for bad literature engenders a proportionate need for fresh air and cooling drinks.

As I was about to enter a bar, a beggar held out his hat to me and looked at me with one of those unforgettable expressions which, if spirit moved matter or if a magnetizer's eye ripened grapes, would overturn thrones.

At the same time I heard a voice whispering in my ear, a voice I recognized perfectly; it was the voice of my good Angel, or good Demon, who accompanies me everywhere. Since Socrates had his good Demon, why should not I have my good Angel, why should not I, like Socrates, have the honor of receiving a certificate of madness signed by the subtle Lelut and the knowing Baillarger?

There is, however, this difference between Socrates' Demon and mine, that his Demon appeared to him only to forbid, to warn or to prevent, whereas mine deigns to advise, suggest, persuade. Poor Socrates had only a censor; mine is a great affirmer, mine is a Demon of action, a Demon of combat.

Well, this is what the voice whispered to me: "A man is the equal of another only if he can prove it, and to be worthy of liberty a man must fight for it."

Immediately I leaped upon the beggar. With a blow of my fist I closed one of his eyes which in an instant grew as big as a ball. I broke one of my finger nails breaking two of his teeth and since, having been born delicate and never having learned to box, I knew I could not knock out the old man quickly, I seized him by the collar with one hand and with the other took him by the throat and began pounding his head against the wall. I must admit that I had first taken the precaution of looking around me and I felt sure that in this deserted suburb no policeman would disturb me for some time.

Then, having by a vigorous kick in the back, strong enough to break his shoulder blades, felled the sexegenarian, I picked up a large branch that happened to be lying on the ground, and beat him with the obstinate energy of a cook tenderizing a beefsteak.

Suddenly — O miracle! O bliss of the philosopher when he sees the truth of his theory verified! — I saw that antique carcass turn over, jump up with a force I should never have expected in a machine so singularly out of order; and with a look of hate that seemed to me a very *good omen*, the decrepit vagabond hurled himself at me and proceeded to give me two black eyes, to knock out four of my teeth and, with the same branch I had used, to beat me to a pulp. Thus it was that my energetic treatment had restored his pride and given him new life.

I then, by many signs, finally made him understand that I considered the argument settled, and getting up I said to him with all the satisfaction of one of the Porch sophists: "Sir, *you are my equal!* I beg you to do me the honor of sharing

my purse. And remember, if you are really philanthropic, when any of your colleagues asks you for alms you must apply the theory which I have just had the *painful* experience of trying out on you."

He swore that he had understood my theory, and that he would follow my advice.