

The Thirty-Six Trades of the State

Arsène Alexandre

1897

—*What is the State?*
—*Everything.*
—*What should it be?*
—*Nothing.*

The doorkeepers of the chamber of deputies ejected the other day a worthy man wearing a blue blouse and carrying a basket,—a peasant who was determined to make his way into the Palais-Bourbon, and who cried with all his might: “But don’t I tell you that I want to see the State?”

This man was in his right. When they ask him for money, they say to him: “It is for the State,” and, when he wants to see this State of which they talk so much, especially when the appropriation bill is under discussion, they laugh in his face.

After all, perhaps his attention was not evil; he desired to bring the State a goose from his farm, or a pair of ducks, or a toothsome chitterling. But they hustle him about, and he is forced to go back with his basket to his country home, without knowing what the State looks like. Let him be consoled; he is not the only one, and we ourselves should have been much embarrassed had he asked us for the information.

We hear the State spoken of continually; we are not acquainted with it; we have the greatest respect for it; we know that it commits many stupidities, but that it commits them with authority. When an omnipotent king said: “I am the State,” we had the resource of representing to ourselves the State in the form of a luxurious and haughty gentleman, with a handsome aquiline nose, holding a globe in one hand and a sceptre in the other. This always gave a feeling of security. Now it has no form; it is formless. It is a mist behind a wicket; it is a prison door or some decorated person. We are at liberty to suppose it to be a many-headed calf, a Hindoo idol hidden in the depths of a dark temple, or a slimy monster crawling in a cave.

Nevertheless, though we know nothing at all as to the nature and form of the personage, and though we are no farther advanced than the peasant ejected from the Greek temple which he supposed to be the residence of the big beast, at least we are informed as to its occupations and its aptitudes.

The State possesses the talent, the privilege, or the impudence to undertake at least thirty-six trades. As it is supposed to work at them for our benefit, whether it please us or not, we are

obliged to pay it for its work, even when it is spoiled, but we have the satisfaction of laughing at it.

The State is extremely well known, in the first place, as a dealer in matches. It sells them at higher prices than matches command elsewhere, but we know that they will not light, and in this fact we have material for gayety of which it would grieve us to be deprived. When Swedish matches came from Sweden, they burned admirably; now that they are made in France, they refuse, but it is the fault of Ibsen—who is a Norwegian.

But we should not judge the State by the quality of its matches. If you knew how well it works at the rest of its trades! It is a theatrical manager, or an investor in theatrical enterprises. It supplies four theatres with funds,— one more than Cadet-Roussel; two are for music and two for literature; but, as they cost a great deal and cannot, after paying the expense of scenery and company, afford the luxury of producing original works, these are played at Brussels.

Nevertheless, do not judge the State by the quality of its matches and the novelty of its *repertoire*. If you knew how skilful it is in every other industry! It is a dealer in tobacco. Its tobacco is like other tobaccos; only it is high in price. You can get it in Belgium, under the name of Belgian tobacco, for half the money. But, Great God! do not go to the length of condemning the State because it manages its theatres shabbily, charges too much for its tobacco, and manufactures harmless matches. It has so many other strings to its bow!

It is a collector of pictures and of objects of ancient art- But, as one can never be sure about these satanic ancients, for some years it has bought nothing but ancient objects manufactured by moderns. With the living there is at least security against deception.

Moreover, as among its trades figures that of Mecenas, and as it directs the fine arts, it believes it well to buy also of the moderns modern works. Only, to be sure that these works shall be really French, it buys them only of the painters whom it sends to Rome. Then it has some little preferences of its own. One may be sure, for example, that it gives no orders to those who are not known in the administrative bureaus; but how can you expect the bureaus to know people whom they do not know?

The State is an architect. Ah! but here no one can give it lessons. In order to be very sure of escaping the critics, it erects nothing but beautiful Renaissance edifices with Greek pediments and Louis XIV masks. These are models, it seems, which have stood their tests. Sometime it forgets the staircase or the windows, but one cannot think of everything. When it builds a hospital, it draws the plans according to the continuous air-current system. That sweeps away the patients in the twinkling of an eye, but this makes room for others.

Do not place too much stress, therefore, on the criticisms applicable to the State's architecture. Judge it rather by its other trades, in which it is without rival. It is certain, for instance, that nowhere in the universe do they make porcelain as expensive as that of Sévres, for a soup-plate costs the State, and us to an extent, some fifty francs. On the other hand, it has not its like for the glare of its gilt and the dazzle of its enamel; it is necessary to put on skates when eating from a Sevres service. However, no one ever eats from a Sevres service, and the ugliest—that is, the most important—pieces do not remain in France. It is consoling to reflect that they are given to foreign sovereigns.

Yes . . . but! . . . the State makes tapestry too. It costs twenty-five thousand francs a yard; only it imitates painting, which is much less expensive, but much more beautiful. Besides, a thing that is not an imitation of another thing has no value in our eyes.

But, if the State tapestries cost a great deal, it must be remembered that they are very pretty—when rolled up!

The State is also a printer. It prints magnificently works that nobody reads, because they interest nobody except the author, and it is doubtful if they interest even him. Then it prints blanks and forms that could be had for one-tenth the money from any little printer in the neighborhood. But the voting and tax-paying grocers can proudly deliver their pepper in cornets coming from the national printing office.

It is engaged in transportation enterprises, and, while its railway carriages are anything but comfortable, railway journeys are more expensive and railway officials less polite here than anywhere else.

It is a colonist, and in its colonies, instead of cultivating cotton, cocoa, caoutchouc, and precious woods, it cultivates office-holders. Of all its thirty-Six trades this is the one at which it is best; nowhere else do they cultivate office-holders as well.

The State also follows many other trades: if you only knew how well it follows them! So do not stop with its matches, its tobacco, its porcelain, its tapestry, its printing-office, and its theatres. The State is also an expert in literature. When it awards a prize to a work, or, by competition, command, or choice, causes one to be brought forth, one may be sure that, once having its prize, it will never more be heard of.

But it is a schoolmaster! It creates Babylonian universities, gigantic faculties, and schools beyond the limits of one's vision. And in these universities and schools it makes bachelors, and these bachelors are absolutely incapable of guiding their own lives and earning their own bread with the knowledge that they have gained. I believe too that among its thirty-six trades the State is a philosopher. It teaches little citizens how they should think; consequently it is delightful to see how they do think! It is true that official ways of thinking change every ten years; but, that there may be no jealous rivalry, all these ways are as good as the matches.

And now, O honest peasant who the other day brought the State a goose, you know what the State is. It has thirty-six trades, and even more, but it is good at none. It is a do-all and a spoil-all. The day when it shall manufacture alcohol we shall drink rotgut, and the day when it shall bake bread our diet will be what it was when Paris was under siege.

And to think that there are honest fellows who wish to present to us as a most seductive future the State entrusted with yet other missions, the State doing everything, managing everything, fostering everything, monopolizing everything!

We are only too ready to refrain from wiping our noses without the authorization of the State, to admire only what the State patronizes, to turn imploringly to State boards of charity instead of using our own arms and heads.

And yet it would be so easy to lose the habit! Ah! if papas and mammas were not stupid, how readily little boys would learn to do Without the State and no longer rely on it, and how quickly it would become what it ought solely to be,—a simple policeman, a good policeman, and not a pretentious botcher of all jobs, even of those which it does not do!

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