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Elections

Octave Mirbeau

1885

What's going to happen? Where will we flee? Already the election campaigns are infected by a terrible leprosy. The cabarets roar, rolling over with drunken eyes. Looming above the intersections, the red, blue, and yellow posters explode across the walls of solitary houses. The peasants hurry to gather their wheat and oats before the political whirlwind blows in, like a devastating sirocco. The bad smell of spilled wine is hanging in the air, and the deafening clamour of committees comes from everywhere, left, right, and center, calling for an encore, and marking time on the bass drum of alcoholic frenzy.

People walk by, cross themselves, don't recognize each other, and see each other as enemies. In all eyes there is a challenge, on every lip a bitterness, and a threat is carried in every fist. A silent war has flared up in the finest hearts, and already we've seen two young people, who love each other as brothers, get into an argument in the village assembly, and spill each others' blood into the dust, when just yesterday they were out dancing merrily with their fiancées. We no longer count the broken marriages, and everyone is playing hide and seek with the sheriff.

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Translated by Robert Helms

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The Countess Verdurette is a generous person. We see her everywhere, always gay, charming, and friendly, and not at all snobbish. She visits the notary and the tax collector, goes in herself to buy outdated canned food from the grocer, carries grafts of exotic rose plants to the home of the old justice of the peace, and sends baskets of oysters to the doctor. Besides using Landaus, mail coaches, and Victorias, she also uses the prehistoric carriages, with springs that squeal, axles that rattle, and threadbare seat-cushions of old serge. The Count himself has stopped wearing his elegant outfits. He goes around in a faded hat, a crumpled jacket, big old work boots, and with an ash-wood cane in his hand. He hardly dares to greet the parish priest (an unpopular man whose blunders have a way of compromising others), but in revenge he pats the stomach of the shoemaker, and liberally lends a hand to the veterinarian. The country takes advantage of his good disposition. His rabbit warrens have all been slaughtered, we flush out all of his baby pheasants from their nests, and cut out the best trees from clusters in the woods on his property. The gamekeeper is at his wits' end, because he's been ordered not to write a single summons.

On the sides of the roads, there are always these suspicious-looking people who we don't know and who we've never seen, following one after the other, constantly greeting everyone, and even greeting the trees, the rocks, the stray cows, and the mad dogs. They are our good candidates. Some wear long beards, while others are clean-shaven. Some are old and bent, others young and full of pep. But they all have the same smile and sing the same tune, which echoes from the valleys to the hills, and then from the hills to the mountains. “

Listen to me, good people, rich and poor, honest and larcenous. You, too, deaf and lame, paraplegics –look at me, and listen. It is I who makes the harvest plentiful, I who turns the miserable cottage into a palace, I who fills the old, empty coffers with gold, and I who crams the poisoned hearts full of happi-

ness. Hurry over here, good people, for I am the savior for sterile women, and for anxious, obedient people. I say to the hail, DO NOT FALL; to the war, DO NOT KILL; and to death, DO NOT COME. I turn the stinking piss of mares into fine wine, and delicious honey flows out of thorns when I touch them.”

Here is what I saw: while the candidate was speaking, a crowd materialized and gathered around him.

“Kind Sir,” wept an old woman, “I have a son who’s off in the war, far, far away.”

“I will return him to you.”

“I have only one leg,” said a crippled man.

“I’ll give you another one.”

“Look at this horrible sore that eats away at my side!” wailed a wretched fellow in the most pathetic cries.

“I’ll lay a medal of honor on your sore with my own hands, and you will be cured.”

“I’m ninety years old,” croaked an old man.

“I’ll get you back to forty.”

“It’s been three days since I had a scrap of bread to eat!” a beggar pleaded.

“I’ll stuff you with cakes.”

Then a murderer appeared brandishing a long knife, with his clothes all drenched in blood.

“I’ve killed my brother, and now I’m off to prison!” he shrieked.

“I’ll tear down the prisons, and slaughter justice with the guillotine. Then I’ll make you a cop.”

“My neighbor is too rich,” said a peasant, “his rabbits eat my corn, and his foxes snatch my chickens.”

“I’ll install you on my own land, and you can nail his children to the barn doors, like screech-owls.”¹

“That little scum just doesn’t want to beat my ponds anymore,” said the rich neighbor.²

“I’ll crucify him on one of the elms along your driveway.”

“Those damned colonies are taking all of our fine young men, Sir!” a young woman sighed.

“I’ll abolish the colonies.”

“I don’t have enough costumers to buy my products!” exclaimed the industrialist.

“I will push our field of conquest straight to the end of the world.”

“Long live the Republic,” said a voice.

The candidate responded, “Long live the Republic!”

“Long live the King,” said another voice.

The candidate responded, “Long live the King!”

“Long live the Emperor,” said a third voice.

The candidate responded, “Long live the Emperor!”

At that moment, a beautiful, superbly-dressed woman stepped from the ranks of the crowd, and walked up to the candidate.

“Do you know me?” she asked.

¹ There was a superstitious fear of owls in rural France, as they were thought to be connected with the devil for their nocturnal cries. When caught, they would often be impaled alive by farmers.

² In order to keep the frogs from croaking and disturbing their sleep, landlords would force tenant farmers to stay up all night, splashing the edges of their private lakes with sticks.

“No,” replied the candidate, “where should I have seen you, you lousy foreigner?”

“I am France. What will you do for me?”

“The same as I’ll do for the others, dear. I’ll eat, I’ll sleep, and my stomach will feel better for the grease. With the money I’ll be taking from your pocket, that bottomless paunch, I’ll have beautiful women, fertile lands, and respectability in the bargain, if you don’t mind. And if you’re not happy about it, that’s no problem, sweetheart. I’ll just have to work you over with my stick!”