

EMILE ZOLA (1840-1902)

Story of a Madman

Translated by Douglas Parmée

Isidore-Jean-Louis Maurin was a worthy middle-class citizen, the owner of several blocks of flats in Belleville and residing on the first floor of one of them. He had grown up in the back rooms of this old house, tending his garden and idling away his days like many a Parisian with time on his hands. At the age of forty he was foolish enough to marry the daughter of one of his tenants, an eighteen-year-old blonde whose grey eyes with their occasional sparkle were as shining and gentle as a cat's.

Six months later she had found her way upstairs to the flat of a young doctor who lived on the floor above. This happened as naturally as anything, one evening during a thunderstorm while Maurin had gone out for a stroll along the fortifications of Paris. Their love grew into a devouring passion. They soon found that the few odd minutes they were able to steal together in secret were not enough; they dreamt of living together as man and wife. Their close proximity, the fact that they were separated from each other by nothing more than the thickness of a ceiling, sharpened their desire still more. At night, the lover could hear the husband coughing in bed.

Mind you, Maurin was a decent sort, known in the district as a model husband; he didn't pry and he was as kind and tolerant as anyone could be. But that was exactly what made him such an exasperating obstacle; with his contented nature, he hardly ever left the flat and the very simplicity of his tastes meant that his young wife was a prisoner in the house. After a few weeks, she had run out of excuses for visiting the second floor and so the lovers decided that the old fellow must be got rid of.

They were reluctant to resort to violence or crime. How could you possibly slit the throat of such a tame sheep? Besides, they were afraid of being found out and sent to the guillotine. In any case, the doctor, who was an ingenious young man, hit on a less risky but equally effective method, the bizarre nature of which fired the young woman's romantic imagination.

One night the whole house was aroused by dreadful screams coming

from the owner's flat. They forced open the door and found the young woman in a terrible state, kneeling on the floor, all dishevelled and shrieking, her shoulders covered in red weals. Maurin was standing in front of her, trembling and quite bewildered. His speech was sturred like that of a drunken man and when pressed he was quite incapable of replying coherently.

'I can't understand it,' he stammered, 'I didn't go near her, she suddenly started screaming.'

When Henriette had somewhat recovered her composure, she herself stammered something, giving her husband a strange look full of a kind of frightened pity. The neighbours went away greatly intrigued and even rather horrified, muttering to themselves that 'it wasn't at all clear'.

Similar scenes recurred regularly and the whole house was soon living in a state of constant alarm. Every time the screams were heard and the neighbours forced their way into the flat, they saw the same scene: Henriette was lying on the floor in a state of collapse and trembling like someone who had just been mercilessly beaten, while Maurin was running round the room in a state of bewilderment, unable to offer any explanation.

The poor man became careworn. Every evening he would go to bed trembling with the secret fear that he would be awakened by Henriette's screams. He could not make head or tail of her strange fits: she would suddenly leap out of bed, hit herself violently round the shoulders, tear her hair and roll about on the floor without giving him the slightest idea as to the cause. He concluded that she must be mad and he made a vow to himself not to answer any questions and to keep this private drama to himself. But his easygoing way of life had vanished with his peace of mind; he lost weight and looked pale and ill; his self-satisfied smile had gone for good.

Meanwhile a rumour—the source of which no one quite knew—was spreading in the neighbourhood that almost every night the poor man was subject to an attack of fever during which he thrashed the unfortunate Henriette to within an inch of her life. His pale, stricken face and his evasive answers, as well as his sad and embarrassed demeanour, served only to confirm this rumour.

From then onwards Maurin could not do anything that was not interpreted as the action of a madman. As soon as he went out, he became the focus of everyone's eyes, monitoring his every move and leading to strange interpretations of every word he uttered: nobody

more resembles a madman than someone who is perfectly sane. If his foot slipped, if he looked up at the sky, if he blew his nose, people would laugh and shrug their shoulders in pity. Street urchins followed him about as though he were some strange animal. At the end of a month, everyone in Belleville knew that Maurin was mad, stark, staring mad.

People would whisper extraordinary things about him. One woman said she had met him on one of the outer boulevards walking in the rain without a hat. It was quite true: it had just been blown off his head by a gust of wind. Another woman declared that he used to walk round his garden at midnight every night, carrying the sort of candle used in churches and chanting the funeral service. This seemed quite terrifying. The truth was that the woman had seen Maurin on one occasion using a lamp to discover the slugs which were eating his lettuces. Gradually they pieced together a whole indictment of queer actions, an overwhelming dossier of mad behaviour. Tongues were busily wagging: 'Such a nice, kind, gentle man! What a shame! But that's how it is! . . . All the same, we'll have to get him put away in the end! . . . He's killing his poor dear wife, such a wonderful well-bred woman . . .'

They went to the police and one fine morning, after a dreadful scene, played to perfection by Henriette, Maurin was bundled into a cab on some pretext or other and taken off to Charenton. When he reached there and realized what was happening, in his rage he bit a warder's thumb right off. They put him into a straitjacket and dumped him among the violent madmen.

The young doctor had arranged for the poor man to be kept shut up in a cell as long as possible. He claimed to have been following Maurin's illness and observing such strange symptoms in him that his colleagues thought they had discovered a new form of madness. Moreover, the whole of Belleville was there to provide circumstantial details. Mental specialists conferred and learned articles were written. The lovers slipped away to enjoy their honeymoon in a leafy retreat in Touraine.

It took Henriette eleven months to become tired of her young doctor. Often, in between kisses, her thoughts had turned to her poor wretch of a husband screaming in his mad-cell. She began to feel a growing affection for him now that such a dreadful fate had overtaken him and he was no longer able to go out and look at his lettuces or take his stroll along the fortifications. Women with grey cat's eyes tend to be subject to such

whims. She left her lover and went post-haste to Charenton, determined to make a full confession.

She had often felt surprised that the doctors were taking so long to discover that Maurin was not mad. At best, she had relied on enjoying only a few weeks' freedom. When they took her to her husband she saw in a shadowy corner of his cell a pale, thin, filthy, animal-like figure, more ghost than a man, who stood up and looked at her with eyes full of mindless, imbecilic horror. The poor man failed to recognize her. And as she stood there in terror, he began to sway to and fro with an idiotic laugh. Suddenly he burst out sobbing and stammered: 'I can't understand it, I can't understand it . . . I didn't go near her! . . .'

Then he hurled himself flat on the floor, exactly as Henriette had done, and kept hitting himself on the shoulders as he screamed and rolled around on the ground.

'He does that trick twenty times a day,' said the warder who had accompanied the young woman.

With her teeth chattering with fear and almost fainting, she covered her eyes to avoid looking at the man she had reduced to this brute beast. Maurin was mad.