

Fetters and Chains

al-Majalla al-Jadida, February 1930

At the beginning of this century, Clemenceau wanted to depict how people toy with one another, deceive one another, and practise, in their private and public relations, every variety of hypocrisy, fraud, and deception. He wrote a one-act play for this purpose, called *The Veil of Happiness*, and succeeded in it admirably, achieving exactly the effect he was aiming for, with an elegant turn of phrase, a sweet style, a light touch, and real insight into what people need, and how much truth they can bear and absorb. And yet, for all that, he never won the public's approval, let alone its admiration; he may even have met with real displeasure and defeat, and his play may well have come close to being met with outright hostility. It was performed in 1900 in one of the Paris theatres, and the public paid it little attention, while the critics offered it only the faintest praise, likely owing more to the author's own standing in literature, politics, and society than to the play itself.

It was performed again ten years later, and its fortune the second time was no better than the first; and the magazine *L'Illustration* has just now published it, on the occasion of Clemenceau's death. We have no doubt people will read it now with the same indifference with which they once watched it performed.

The clearest sign of this is that *L'Illustration* itself left it aside for thirty years, and did not publish it until after its author's death, even though the magazine regularly publishes plays of every quality, good and bad, valuable and absurd alike. And yet Clemenceau took a great many precautions in this play: he set its events in China, not in Paris, not in France, not in Europe, not in any country connected, closely or distantly, to the French — and he made symbol his chosen path throughout, never telling people outright that they were hypocrites or deceivers, never targeting any particular system of their political or social order. Instead, he depicted a rich, noble Chinese man who had lost his sight, and who bore this trial happily and contentedly, since he perceived around him nothing but sincerity, loyalty, devoted care, and eagerness to please him.

He felt, from his friends, an affection unlike any other; he felt, from his son, a devotion unmatched by any other; and he saw in his wife the very ideal of chastity, fidelity, and sincerity, alongside her physical and spiritual beauty.

He was, besides, a gifted poet, and a certain European doctor offered to restore his sight to him. He accepted, though with great doubt and much hesitation, since he neither trusted nor felt at ease with Europeans; he spoke of this to one of his friends, who shared his doubts, and warned him against Europeans, calling them Satan's own soldiers. In the end, he accepted the European's offer, though half in despair, and kept his acceptance hidden from most of those closest to him.

Throughout the play, we see him happy and content, singing the praises of his friends' loyalty, his son's devotion, and his wife's self-sacrifice on his behalf, as we described above; we see him so delighted with his own share of happiness that he longs to share it with everyone around him. A wretched man, condemned to exile, comes before him on his way to banishment, humiliated and tormented by hunger, and our blind man gives him money and clothing, exposing himself thereby to the government's own displeasure.

God, it seemed, wished to complete His blessing upon him, and carry his happiness to its very height: the Emperor's own messenger arrives, bearing gifts, curiosities, and a magnificent title, for the Emperor has read one of his poetry collections, been greatly impressed by it, and ordered it read throughout every province of the empire, favouring its author with honour, distinction, and gifts of his own.

Our man, at ease and in good spirits, shares his happiness with his friends, drinking and pouring drinks for them, singing to them of life's sweetness, nature's beauty, and the joy of living. Drink finally overcomes him, and he falls asleep; his friends drift away for a while, and then he wakes from his sleep to find the European's medicine has worked: the veil has fallen from his eyes. He now sees the earth, the sun, the sky, sees everything around him, astonished at this miracle, scarcely able to contain his own joy and delight — but then he sees a man slipping into his house, stealing some of the money and goods within it, and this man is none other than the very wretch our blind man had once helped with money and clothing, and had pleaded with the Emperor to pardon.

But our man is a happy one, and he lets this wretch go, along with whatever he took. Yet he hears a sound, rises, and looks into the adjoining room — and there he sees his own son mimicking his father's confused, stumbling movements, mocking him, ridiculing him, while his tutor encourages and eggs him on. He then looks and finds a book lying open before him; he has scarcely fixed his eyes on it before he recognizes

it as his own poetry collection, the very one for which the Emperor had honoured him — published now by one of his own friends, who has claimed a share in its composition.

See him, then, as all of this destroys his happiness and contentment at once: the very man he made steals from him; his own son mocks him; his own friend betrays him over his own poetry collection. And yet, through all of this, he remains happy still, for his wife remains to him. He hurries to her chamber, finds it locked, senses something happening within; and when he steals a glance, he sees his wife sinning with another friend of his. He very nearly loses his mind — but then remembers, almost at once, that he had once been blind, and had once been happy, and that his cure from this affliction was nothing but the doing of that European doctor. Are the Europeans not Satan's own soldiers? Has this European, who restored his sight to him, not simply bewitched him, and made him see illusions instead?

Yes — everything he now sees is nothing but sorcery, the Devil's own work: the wretch never stole from him, his son never mocked his father, his friend never betrayed him over his poetry collection, his wife never sinned against her own honour. All of it is sorcery, and it must be made to vanish — and what could be easier than making it vanish?

The European doctor had told him that a small amount of his medicine restores sight, while a large amount takes it away again. And so, with astonishing speed, our man seizes the bottle and empties it into his eyes — and, with a single cry, a dark and terrible blackness falls once more over this man's eyes, and he is blind again, just as he was before! He calls his friends and his wife to him, and they come, smiling, though secretly scowling at him just as they had scowled at him before, and he receives them, content and happy, for he perceives from them nothing but what he wishes to perceive. He takes up his lute and sings to them once more, as he had done before, of life's sweetness, nature's beauty, and the joy of living.

This play never won the public's approval, let alone its admiration, and critics have laboured to explain this failure by saying the play runs too long, better suited to rhetoric than to the stage. But the real explanation, it seems, is that this play simply failed to please that "tyrant" who so often holds sway over literature and writers alike, spoiling everything for both of them at once. And this "tyrant" is public taste. It is not enough to compose verse well, or write fine prose, or craft a skilful

story, in order to please people; one must, alongside all of this — indeed, before all of this — please public taste, or, more precisely, flatter public taste, in order to please people at all.

Neither artistic excellence alone, nor fidelity to truth alone, is enough to satisfy public taste; it appears, rather, that a certain flattery of particular emotions and inclinations — a certain literary hypocrisy, to put it plainly — is necessary to satisfy that taste, and to win people's admiration. The clearest sign of this is that we now admire a whole array of writers, poets, and philosophers whom their own contemporaries detested intensely — neglecting some of them entirely, harming others, and putting a number of them to death outright. And if we search for the reasons that drove people to neglect, harm, or kill these writers, poets, and philosophers, we find only a single cause: a fundamental clash between strong individual personalities and the collective soul of the community, and whatever public taste then embodied that collective soul.

This thinker holds a view of religion that does not suit the community, which then rejects it, resists it, and finally harms its holder — harm proportionate, on the one hand, to the community's own temperament, and, on the other, to how sharply that view clashes with it.

This poet or writer adopts some new method in the art of verse or prose, which the community rejects, and then resists with a force that varies according to the community's own temperament, and how sharply that temperament clashes with the new method.

Some writers, poets, and thinkers prefer comfort and ease, and so fall in step with the public, and win its approval; others among them prefer their own individuality at first, but, once they sense the public's resistance, grow faint, and submit — either completely, or with a certain measure of skill and manoeuvring.

Both groups, in the end, simply follow the community — they are its shadow. Only a very small number of writers, poets, and thinkers truly prefer their own individuality; when these feel the public's resistance, that resistance only makes them stronger and more resolute, so that open war breaks out between them and the community, and their fortunes, victory or defeat, vary with the circumstances of their own age. But they usually arrive, in the end, at a genuine triumph, one their own views and doctrines eventually win for themselves — though only after they themselves have passed away, and people have forgotten them as individuals.

You see, then, that the writer's freedom is nothing but a myth, and that it is both excessive and vain to regard him as a man enjoying a complete, or nearly complete, freedom. You have already seen, elsewhere in this discussion, that the writer is constrained, even in the very act of literary production, by his own temperament and nature — he cannot produce what you might wish him to produce, only what he himself is capable of producing. And you now see that he can rarely even publish everything he does manage to produce, being constrained in that, too, by the milieu he lives in, or by public taste.

And you know, too, that there is yet another authority binding and chaining the writer, in both his production and its publication: the authority of government, which oversees the protection of the public face of social life — religion, morality, and the various established orders. After all of this, can one still speak of writers' freedom to produce and publish without that very mention being accompanied by a smile full of both irony and pity? Writers are not free; they are chained. And who knows — perhaps some of these very chains protect writers themselves, and protect communities, too, from a great deal of harm; for freedom is not entirely a good, nor are chains entirely an evil.