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GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, a doctor's son, was born in Rouen in 1821, and sent at eighteen to study law in Paris. While still a schoolboy, however, he professed himself 'disgusted with life', in romantic scorn of bourgeois society, and he showed no distress when a mysterious nervous disease broke off his professional studies. Flaubert retired to Croisset, near Rouen, on a private income, and devoted himself to his writing.

In his early works, particularly *The Temptation of St Anthony* (begun in 1848), Flaubert tended to give free rein to his flamboyant imagination, but on the advice of his friends he later disciplined his romantic exuberance in an attempt to achieve total objectivity and a harmonious prose style. This ambition cost him enormous toil and brought him little success in his lifetime. After the publication of *Madame Bovary* in the *Revue de Paris* (1856-7) he was tried for offending public morals; *Salammbô* (1862) was criticized for the meticulous historical detail surrounding the exotic story; *Sentimental Education* (1869) was misunderstood by the critics; and the political play *The Candidates* (1874) was a disastrous failure. Only *Three Tales* (1877) was an unqualified success with public and critics alike, but it appeared when Flaubert's spirits, health and finances were at their lowest ebb.

After his death in 1880 Flaubert's fame and reputation grew steadily, strengthened by the publication of his unfinished comic masterpiece, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881) and his remarkable *Correspondence*.

ROBERT BALDICK, who died in 1972, was a Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford, and of the Royal Society of Literature, and joint editor of Penguin Classics (1964-72). He translated the works of a wide range of French authors, from Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Huysmans and Verne to Montherlant, Sartre, Salacrou and Simenon. He also wrote a history of duelling, a study of the Siege of Paris, and biographies of Huysmans, the Goncourts, Frédéric Lemaître and Murger. He was married to the American writer and translator, Jacqueline Baldick.

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GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, 法国文学

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Three Tales



TRANSLATED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

ROBERT BALDICK



PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

This translation first published 1961
Reprinted 1965, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978

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by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd
Aylesbury, Bucks
Set in Linotype Granjon

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN Flaubert began writing the *Three Tales*, in 1875, the world saw him as a famous, prosperous author in his early fifties, with every reason to feel content with life; but he saw himself as an old man, with failure and sorrow behind him and poverty and death not far ahead.

He had spent the greater part of his adult life in the solitude of his home at Croisset, near Rouen, shunning the world and its pleasures, partly because of the mysterious nervous disease which had struck him down as a young man, but largely because he preferred to devote his energies almost exclusively to literature. Yet his books had brought him little satisfaction, and though he pretended that he did not care how they were received, he was deeply hurt by the hostility and incomprehension shown by public and critics alike. He had been put on trial for committing an 'outrage to public morals and religion' with *Madame Bovary* (1857); and if the book had sold well it had been for the wrong reasons, while the profits had disappeared into the publisher's pocket. *Salammbô* (1862), his novel on ancient Carthage, had been condemned by the critics as tedious, by the clergy as pagan, and by the archaeologists as inaccurate. *Sentimental Education* (1869), which Flaubert regarded as his masterpiece, had been greeted with uncomprehending abuse and its author accused of cynical immorality. In 1874 the final version of his *Temptation of St Anthony* had been virtually ignored, while his play *The Candidate* had been taken off after four disastrous performances; and at present he was working on the devastating satire *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, which was even less likely to appeal to the public of his day.

He had other, more personal reasons to feel sad and appre-

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hensive in 1875. Many of his old friends and comrades in arms had died in recent years: first Louis Bouilhet and Sainte-Beuve, then Jules Duplan and Jules de Goncourt, and finally Théophile Gautier and Ernest Feydeau. In 1870 the Prussians had occupied Croisset, and Flaubert had been forced not only to leave his house but also to run errands for the enemy troops. Less than two years later his mother had died. And then, in April 1875, his niece's husband, a wood-merchant called Ernest Commanville, had been threatened with bankruptcy. To save the Commanvilles Flaubert had put his entire fortune at their disposal, sold all his property at Deauville, and even reconciled himself to the possibility of giving up Croisset. Yet it was at this unhappy time that he wrote the work which cost him the least effort, gave him the most pleasure, and won the greatest acclaim of all his books.

The *Three Tales* are still generally regarded as his most successful and most representative work, and this is not simply because they were the last of his writings to be published before his death in 1880. They reveal, it is true, a mastery of style acquired in the course of a lifetime's arduous labour, but each tale is also as it were a quintessential abstract of one or more of Flaubert's great novels.

Thus *A Simple Heart* appears to combine the underlying tenderness of *Sentimental Education* with the style and setting of *Madame Bovary*; and readers of the latter novel will be quick to notice the points of resemblance between Homais and Bourias, between Emma Bovary's reactions to the ball at La Vaubyessard and Félicité's to the fair at Colleville, between the cinematic technique used in the famous scene of the agricultural show in *Madame Bovary* and the analagous but rather subtler presentation of Félicité's death. Similarly *The Legend of St Julian Hospitator* recalls the more ambitious but less successful *Temptation of St Anthony*, while *Herodias*, despite all Flaubert's efforts to distinguish it from his previous essay in

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historical reconstruction, inevitably invites comparison with *Salammbô*.

That is not to say that the *Three Tales* are merely exercises in literary dehydration. On the contrary, each story, for all its affinities with Flaubert's earlier work, has its separate origins in some aspect of his artistic or emotional experience.

This is even true of *Herodias*, which at first sight would seem to be the least personal of the three tales. It was almost certainly inspired by a sculptured tympanum on the front of the Cathedral at Rouen, the city where Flaubert was born in 1821 and where he spent his formative years, for on this tympanum the thirteenth-century sculptor represented Salome dancing on her hands in front of Herod, exactly as the nineteenth-century writer was to describe her in his story. But Flaubert had seen his Salome more than once in the flesh as well as in stone. In 1864, for instance, while taking a bath at an establishment in Corbeil, he had glimpsed her bare arm reaching through the half-open door of his cubicle to take his discarded clothes. And earlier still, in 1850, at Isna on the Middle Nile, Salome had danced for him in the person of Kuchiuk-Hanem, a lovely *almeh* from Cairo who performed the erotic Dance of the Bee to the sound of harps played by two blindfold musicians.

The Legend of St Julian Hospitator likewise owes something to Rouen Cathedral – this time to a stained-glass window in the north aisle which depicts the life of the Saint in some thirty scenes – though the idea of writing the story apparently came to Flaubert in 1846, when he and Maxime du Camp saw a little statue of St Julian in the church of Caudebec-en-Caux.

However, the story most closely associated with Flaubert's own life and with his native province is undoubtedly *A Simple Heart*. Every character, every place, every emotion in this tale corresponds to some person, some scene, some feeling in the author's past. In his childhood and youth he had often spent the summer holidays with his mother's relatives at Pont-

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l'Évêque or Trouville. All the place-names and descriptions given in *A Simple Heart* are accurate; several of the sites mentioned, such as the Marais and the farm of Geffosses, belonged to the Flauberts, and there was in fact a Golden Lamb at Trouville kept by a Mère David. As for the other minor figures in the story, Flaubert had either known them personally or heard his parents speak of them, and generally he alters their names only slightly, if at all; thus Pont-l'Évêque boasted a Bourais, a Varin, and a Mathieu, Nastasie Barette was a woman called La Barbette, while the disreputable Marquis de Grémanville was a no less disreputable great-uncle of Flaubert's, Fouet de Crémanville. Félicité herself was drawn partly from an unmarried mother called Léonie whom Flaubert had met at Trouville, and partly from Julie, the old servant who had been with his family since he was a boy and who was to outlive her master. Félicité's parrot belonged in reality to Pierre Barbey, a retired sea-captain living at Trouville, though Barbey's bird had a rather more extensive and colourful repertory of phrases than Loulou. Mme Aubain, Félicité's mistress, bears a strong resemblance to Flaubert's aunt, Mme Allais, who likewise lived for many years at Pont-l'Évêque. Her children, Paul and Virginie, are obviously Flaubert himself and his sister Caroline, whose early death caused Mme Flaubert the same overwhelming grief experienced by Mme Aubain. That does not mean that Paul Aubain is the only character to partake of the author. Indeed Flaubert appears to identify himself with a number of characters to the extent of endowing them with his own feelings and experiences down to the smallest details. Thus when he tells us that Mme Aubain had to sell most of her property and leave her house at Saint-Melaine for one at Pont-l'Évêque which was cheaper to run, we recall that he had recently been obliged to sell his land at Deauville and was preparing to give up his flat in the Rue Murillo in Paris to move into his niece's more modest apartment in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. When

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we read that Félicité and Mme Aubain wept over Virginie's little moth-eaten plush hat, we are reminded that Flaubert treasured an old hat that had belonged to his mother. Most significant of all, when we are told how Félicité was struck down by the driver of a coach on the Honfleur road beyond Saint-Gatien, we remember that it was on this very same spot that Flaubert had suffered the first unexpected attack of his nervous disease in January 1844. For one brief moment at least, Flaubert and Félicité are joined together in an identical experience.

The actual writing of the *Three Tales* was begun in the autumn of 1875, while Flaubert was spending a peaceful holiday at Concarneau in Brittany with his friend Georges Pouchet, the natural historian. In a letter to Mme Roger des Genettes he explained that he had put *Bouvard and Pécuchet* aside for the moment and was looking for a more congenial subject for a novel. 'In the meantime,' he added, 'I am going to start writing *The Legend of St Julian Hospitator*, just to have something to do and to see if I am still capable of putting a sentence together, which I rather doubt.' In fact, as we have seen, the idea of writing the story of St Julian had come to him some thirty years before, and as recently as 1874 he had made copious notes on every aspect of hunting, an art on which his friend Edmond Laporte also gave him detailed information. For the account of the Saint's life he consulted various works of hagiography, notably the Bollandists, Jacopo da Voragine's *Golden Legend*, and one of the manuscripts of the thirteenth-century *Legend of St Julian* kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale, as well as the *Historical and Descriptive Essay on Glass Painting* by his old drawing-master, E. H. Langlois, a book which contained a reproduction of the Rouen Cathedral window. But in dealing with all these documents he exercised the artist's right to select, compress, and alter his material, deciding for instance that his Julian should discover the nature of his crime by him-

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self and not from his wife, that he should leave his wife after the murder instead of travelling with her, and that instead of preceding him the Leper should carry him up to Heaven in a final apotheosis. In his correspondence Flaubert repeatedly and rightly emphasized the gulf which separated his sources from his finished work. Thus he claimed with justifiable complacency that no one would dare to compare the two nightmarish hunts in his story with the hunt in Victor Hugo's *Legend of the Handsome Pecopin*. And when a *de luxe* edition of his work was mooted some time later, Flaubert refused to authorize any illustration apart from a reproduction of the Rouen window – and that not because it could add anything to the story, but on the contrary because it would reveal the full extent of his achievement. To his uncomprehending publisher he wrote: ‘Comparing the picture and the text, people would have said to themselves: “I don’t understand. How did he get this from that?”’

The Legend of St Julian Hospitator was completed in Paris in February 1876, and in March, saddened by the news of the death of Louise Colet, his former mistress, he set to work on *A Simple Heart*. The beginning of the story gave him considerable trouble: after working sixteen hours one day and all the next he found he had written only a single page. Then in April he paid a visit to Honfleur and Pont-l’Évêque which, as he told a friend, ‘filled me with sadness, for I was obliged to steep myself in a bath of memories. How old I am, *mon Dieu*, how old!’ He was writing this second tale especially for one of his dearest friends, George Sand, who had recently reproached him for ‘spreading unhappiness’ with his books, to show her that he was capable of telling a tender, moving story in a detached, unemotional style. But although George Sand had the pleasure of knowing that she had inspired *A Simple Heart*, she never read the story of Félicité. In June 1876 she died at her home at Nohant, where Flaubert attended her funeral, weep-

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ing like a child at the sight of her coffin and feeling, as he later told Maurice Sand, 'as if I were burying my mother for a second time'. He returned to Croisset to learn of the death of his oldest childhood friend, Ernest Lemarié, and to complete *A Simple Heart* in an atmosphere of nostalgic melancholy. Because the story owed so much to private memories, he was even more than usually careful to guard against any possible inaccuracy. Thus he consulted Grisolles's classic treatise on pneumonia to describe Félicité's last illness, studied the Lisieux euchology to get the details of the Corpus Christi procession right, and even borrowed a stuffed parrot from Rouen Museum to serve as a model for Loulou. But this bird, installed in a place of honour on Flaubert's work-table, like Loulou in Félicité's bedroom, was more than just a visual aid: it was another significant symbol of the link between author and character.

From *A Simple Heart* Flaubert turned in August 1876 to *Herodias*, a story inspired, as we have seen, partly by the Rouen tympanum and partly no doubt by the author's incurable nostalgia for the East. He also had certain historical and ethnological reasons for writing it, as he explained to Mme Roger des Genettes. 'The story of Herodias,' he declared, 'as I understand it, has nothing to do with religion. What attracts me about it is the official attitude of Herod (who was a real Prefect) and the ferocious figure of Herodias, a sort of cross between Cleopatra and Mme de Maintenon. The racial question dominated everything.' Before he started writing *Herodias*, he consulted all the relevant sources, ancient and modern, from the Gospels and Flavius Josephus down to Renan and Parent. He begged the Orientalist Clermont-Ganneau for details of the view from the fortress of Machaerus; he asked his friends Baudry and Laporte for the Arabic names of the stars visible in Palestine towards the end of August; at one point he even expressed regret that he could not have a newly severed

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head before him when describing Salome's prize. By November 1876 the writing of *Herodias* was under way, in February 1877 it was completed, and in April the *Three Tales* were published in Paris by Charpentier.

Friends and critics promptly acclaimed the book as a masterpiece, the only dissenter of note being the implacable Brunetière, who expressed the opinion that it was 'the feeblest thing M. Flaubert has written to date'. A few attempts were made to link the tales together, either by regarding them as studies of three *illuminati* who found fulfilment in their different spheres, or by considering them as accounts of human activity in its historical, legendary, and everyday aspects. Most commentators, however, preferred to discuss each story separately.

Herodias was and still is the least admired of the three tales. Perhaps only a historian can do full justice to Flaubert's evocatory skill, and probably no tribute gave greater pleasure to the author than Taine's comment: 'These eighty pages teach me more about the circumstances, the origins, and the background of Christianity than all Renan's work.'

The Legend of St Julian Hospitator met with readier and warmer appreciation. It was generally acknowledged that the two-dimensional figures, the rich colours, the swift-moving action, the miraculous events, and the stylized descriptions all combined to produce the same effect as a stained-glass window or a Book of Hours. This, as Taine pointed out, was 'the world imagined by the Middle Ages and not the Middle Ages themselves'. On the other hand, Jules Lemaître, who described the story as 'a Gothic jewel of rare perfection', claimed that Flaubert had succeeded in capturing the essential spirit of medieval times. 'I consider this legend to be true', he wrote, 'in that Julian the parricide and the saint, with his lust for blood and his love of God, is wonderfully symbolic of the Middle Ages, their violence and their mysticism.'

It was *A Simple Heart*, however, which right from the start

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won the greatest acclaim. This was natural enough, for it was neither a historical reconstruction nor an artistic *tour de force* but a tale rooted in the author's own time and country, his own feelings and experiences. Here Flaubert had taken George Sand's advice and revealed something of his essential kindness and gentleness, though not openly or explicitly. As the perceptive Jules Lemaître observed, 'Flaubert's style has never been more concise and controlled; one would think he was afraid of falling a prey to emotion'. Some critics have suggested that Flaubert's reference to 'dog-like devotion' shows contempt for Félicité, and that the final confusion in her mind between the stuffed parrot and the Holy Ghost is a stroke of cruel irony on the author's part. His close identification of himself with Félicité, to which we have already referred, would seem to contradict these hypotheses. But perhaps the last word on this point should be left to Flaubert himself.

'The *Story of a Simple Heart*', he told Mme Roger des Genettes, 'is just the account of an obscure life, that of a poor country girl, pious but fervent, discreetly loyal, and tender as new-baked bread. She loves one after the other a man, her mistress's children, a nephew of hers, an old man whom she nurses, and her parrot. When the parrot dies she has it stuffed, and when she herself comes to die she confuses the parrot with the Holy Ghost. This is not at all ironical as you may suppose, but on the contrary very serious and very sad. I want to move tender hearts to pity and tears, for I am tender-hearted myself.'

And the most deliberately impassive of all writers added hopefully: 'Now, surely, no one will accuse me of being inhuman any more. . . .'

R. B.

