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**ZEST FOR LIFE** poses the problem: what makes men happy? what gives them the will to live, the capacity to enjoy life despite its miseries? Zola confronts opposing characters: Pauline, robust, gay, courageous, and Lazare, the neurotic intellectual.

Pauline, orphaned at ten years old and heiress to a modest fortune, goes to live with her relatives the Chanteaus in a poor seaside village. At first all goes well; her sunny nature endears her to all, and she becomes engaged to her cousin, brilliant but unstable Lazare. She generously subsidises his impractical schemes; on these and household expenses, her fortune is gradually frittered away. Madame Chanteau's sense of guilt at this despoilment breeds resentment and hatred of her niece, and she encourages Lazare's flirtation with Louise, a rich and pretty visitor. Pauline, heartbroken, plans to leave, but unselfishly stays to nurse first her ailing uncle, then her aunt in a sudden fatal illness. The aunt's death brings her closer to Lazare again, but seeing his hopeless depression she quixotically fetches back Louise and urges them to marry. But Pauline's sacrifice brings no happiness to neurotic Lazare; he is soon alienated from his wife and turns to Pauline once more—too late. Meanwhile Louise is pregnant; when her confinement comes it is Pauline who devotedly helps her and saves the child's life. Deprived of the happiness to which her zest for life entitled her, she will not deny life; she finds content in helping others live.

# ZEST FOR LIFE

ÉMILE ZOLA

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LONDON  
ELEK BOOKS

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**ELEK BOOKS LTD.**  
*14 Great James Street*  
*London, W.C.1*

*First Impression August 1955*

*Second Impression March 1956*

*Printed in Great Britain by*  
**HARDING & CURTIS LTD.**  
*Bath, Somerset*

## P R E F A C E

OF all the ideas of the nineteenth century on which we strive to pin responsibilities for the catastrophes of our own day, optimism and materialism are the most derided. It is perfectly clear that in their crudest forms the beliefs in social perfectibility and the explanation of the Universe on mechanistic principles are threadbare. Not a little of the neglect of Émile Zola's genius has been due to his reputation as an optimistic materialist—a peculiarly contemptible combination of all that has now been exploded. Zola, in fact, was neither an optimist nor a materialist in the pejorative sense in which these words are now used. In his very earliest novels, written when he was in his twenties, in *Thérèse Raquin* for example, he held rather crude mechanistic views of human character. At the very end of his life, in the lamentable *Quatre Évangiles* he put forward very doctrinaire and absurd Utopian theories of social perfectibility. It would be hard, however, if a great writer had to be judged on the productions of his callow youth and his premature dotage. Zola's materialism was, in fact, not mechanistic at all; it was rather a sort of pantheism, a vitalism which sought man's soul in all the aspects of creation. His was not a profound intellect—the greatest novelists have not been intellectuals. His vitalism would not stand up to any serious philosophical or theological attack. It was, however, the expression of the deep love of life of a man whose imaginative fecundity brimmed over into everything he came upon. It was courageous, creative and humane. It was *not* in any sense a simple or naive optimism. Few of the great nineteenth century writers were as naively optimistic as it has been convenient for their twentieth century critics to imagine them. Zola—the black romantic—had his full measure of understanding of evil and pain, even though he was not willing to accept the idea of original sin. The author of *Earth* and *The Dram Shop* can hardly be charged with ignoring the darker sides of human life. But, the critics may say, it is perfectly possible for a man to see the evil and pain around him most clearly and yet remain confident, integrated, almost smug inside himself. Is not Zola's vitalism, his final assurance that the world was enough without the revelation of religion, simply the expression of a successful, energetic man who saw the flaws in life around and yet remained absurdly untroubled in his own soul? Was not Zola's constant activity, his enormous produc-

tivity as a writer, simply the expression of a man who was too busy to reflect deeply about the meaning of his own life?

In fact, this was not so. In the very middle of his career, at the very height of his success, Zola was a deeply troubled, unhappy man, nervously upset, obsessed with fears of death. The great triumph of his life, it may well be said, was not the wonderful novels he wrote or his courageous defence of Dreyfus, but his conquest of his own neurotic self, his victory over the dark fears that threatened the foundations of his belief in life. It is a victory the more remarkable that it was won without relinquishing his humanistic agnosticism, without capitulating to the forces of pessimism, decadence and neo-Catholicism which engulfed so many of the intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century. It is a victory that does much to vindicate the despised 'liberal materialism' of the nineteenth century. That victory is expressed in the novel *Zest for Life*.

*Zest for Life* is not one of the four great novels of the Rougon Macquart series, but it is one of his most interesting novels. It is the most directly autobiographical and the most completely concerned with ideas. Already by 1880, after the success of *The Dram Shop* and *Nana*, Zola had become deeply depressed. He had overworked. The penury and near starvation of his early years had left marks that even his stern discipline of hard work could not deny. His marriage, though full of love, had proved fruitless. He felt most deeply the lack of an heir. He was obsessed with the thought of death. Some of his disciples had already begun to leave the broad plains of naturalism for more tortuous artistic paths. The idea of a school of young men following in his footsteps which might have been a substitute for children had failed. About this time he told Goncourt that he and his wife used to lie in bed at night, not speaking, yet each knowing that the other had but one thought—Death. It was a poisonous centre to the life of riches and success which were symbolized in his extravagantly furnished, over opulent new house at Médan. It was in these circumstances that he conceived the idea of *Zest for Life*.

The events of the year 1880, however, were so disastrous for Zola's personal life that he was unable to go on with the idea. In that year Flaubert died, and, for all the underlying disagreements between the two men, Flaubert was Zola's father in the world of letters. In that year, too, Zola's mother, returning from a visit to relatives in Eastern France, was taken ill in Paris and brought to her son's house at Médan to die. Her last illness was a painful and difficult one. Her underlying antagonism to Alexandrine, Zola's wife, was

released. She refused to have her daughter-in-law to nurse her, accusing her of poisoning the food. When, at last, the old lady died, her coffin had to be lowered from the window, for the stairs of the house were too narrow. Zola declared that for some time after this he could only think of how in a short while he and his wife would leave the house by the same route. The whole concept of *Zest for Life* was too painful for him. He did not take up the theme again until 1883 and the work was first published in the following year.

*Zest for Life*, with its curious flat, stagnating milieu of a little, broken-down fishing village is the story of two personalities—Lazare, the brilliant, neurotic pessimistic young man of promise which comes to nothing and Pauline Quenu, the young, healthy girl, sensible, full of animal pleasure, content with life, finding meaning in a simple life of service and good works. Lazare is the embodiment of the decadent end of nineteenth century prosperity, Wagneresque, Tchekhovian. Zola, in his notes, describes him as '*une sorte de René ou de Werther naturaliste.*' Naturalism, he says, the very school of literature he had created, had produced the sceptic who believes in nothing in the world, who denies progress. In the character of Lazare, then, he fought the neurotic side of himself and won. For it is Pauline's life in joy which triumphs. She is the daughter of the healthy, plump, sensual pork butcher Lisa Macquart of *Le Ventre de Paris* and her good works, her self-sacrifice have nothing anaemic in them. She is one of the most complete women of nineteenth century fiction. But Zola's acceptance of life goes further than pure good health or selfless living. The final scene of *Zest for Life* is one of the most curious that Zola ever wrote. I will not anticipate the reader's interest by describing it. One thing is clear, however; it is not only those who have 'every reason to love life' who, in Zola's opinion, worship it.

Apart from Lazare and Pauline, the novel contains at least two other memorable characters. Madame Chanteau is a brilliant study of a good, sensible woman twisted and destroyed by maternal love. Louise is a realistic study of a typical nineteenth century heroine—the child-wife, David Copperfield's Dora.

The style of the book is purposefully flat, rising to its expected heights in the great set scenes which Zola so delighted in writing. Jean Stewart's translation meets both demands most admirably, conveying the day to day calm of Pauline's life as well as the day to day despairing ennui of Lazare's.

ANGUS WILSON



## CHAPTER I

WHEN the cuckoo-clock in the dining-room struck six, Chanteau gave up all hope. He dragged himself painfully out of the arm-chair where he was warming his heavy, gout-swollen legs in front of a coke fire. For the last two hours he had been expecting Madame Chanteau, who was due back that day after a five weeks' absence, bringing with her from Paris their little cousin Pauline Quenu, to whom the Chanteaus were going to act as guardians.

'It's extraordinary, Véronique,' he said, pushing open the kitchen door. 'They must have met with an accident.'

The maid, a big harsh-featured woman of thirty-five, with hands like a man's, was busy removing from the fire a leg of mutton which was undoubtedly going to be overdone. She did not grumble, but her leathery cheeks were pale with anger.

'Madame must have stayed in Paris,' she said tartly. 'This endless fuss and bother, upsetting the whole house!'

'No, no,' Chanteau explained, 'that telegram yesterday said the little girl's affairs were definitely settled . . . Madame must have reached Caen this morning; she was to stop there to see Davoine. At one o'clock she was to take the train again; at two she was to get off at Bayeux; at three, old Malivoire's coach was to drop her at Arromanches, and even allowing for some delay in putting the horses to that old berline, Madame could have been here by four o'clock, half-past four at latest . . . It's not more than ten kilometres from Arromanches to Bonneville.'

The cook, her eyes fixed on her joint, listened to all these calculations with an occasional nod of her head. After a moment's hesitation he added: 'You might go to the corner of the road and look, Véronique.'

She stared at him, paler than ever with repressed wrath. 'Indeed? why should I? . . . Since Monsieur Lazare's gone paddling about outside to meet them already, it's not worth me getting myself all muddled up.'

'You see,' murmured Chanteau gently, 'I'm beginning to feel a bit anxious about my son too. No signs of him either. What can he have been doing out on the road for a whole hour?'

Then, without another word, Véronique took down an old black woollen shawl from a peg and wrapped it round her head and shoulders. As her master was following her into the passage, she

said to him sharply: 'You get back in front of your fire, if you don't want to be howling all to-morrow with your aches and pains.'

She slammed the door behind her. On the porch, she put on her sabots and faced the gale, shouting: 'God almighty! that brat'll be able to boast of having made fools of us!'

Chanteau sat on, quietly. He was used to the maid's outbursts; she had entered his service the year of his marriage, when she was fifteen. When the sound of sabots had died away he escaped like a schoolboy on holiday, and went along the passage to take up his stand in front of a glass door that looked out on to the sea. There he stood for a moment in self-oblivion, a short, paunchy figure, florid-faced, and under the snowy cap of his close-cropped hair his big, prominent blue eyes stared up at the sky. He was barely fifty-six, but the attacks of gout from which he suffered had aged him prematurely. His anxiety forgotten, a faraway look in his eyes, he told himself that little Pauline would surely end by winning Véronique's heart.

And anyhow, was he to blame? When that solicitor in Paris had written to tell him that his cousin Quenu had just died, six months after his wife, he had felt unable to refuse. It was true that they had not seen much of one another, for the family was widely scattered; Chanteau's father, after leaving the South of France and wandering all over the country as a plain journeyman carpenter, had started a timber business in Caen, dealing in wood from the North of France; whereas little Quenu, on his father's death, had landed in Paris, where another uncle had, later, made over to him a big *charcuterie* in the very middle of the Halles district. And they had met on two or three occasions only, when Chanteau's painful affliction had obliged him to leave his business and travel to Paris to consult famous doctors. The two men, however, had a great respect for one another; and perhaps the dying Quenu had longed for his daughter to enjoy the healthful air of the seaside. In any case the girl would be no financial burden to them; quite the reverse, since she inherited the *charcuterie*. Finally, Madame Chanteau had accepted, so enthusiastically indeed that she had insisted on sparing her husband the dangerous fatigue of a journey and, with her constant craving for activity, she had gone off alone to tramp the streets and settle the business. And, for Chanteau, his wife's satisfaction was enough.

But what could be keeping them both? His fears revived as he watched the livid sky, where the west wind was driving great black clouds like sooty rags, wisps of which trailed afar off in the sea. It

was one of those storms that occur in March, when the equinoctial tides batter the coasts with fury. The sea was just beginning to come in, and was as yet visible only as a white band on the horizon, a thin, distant streak of foam; the beach, to-day, lay fully exposed, a league-long expanse of dark seaweed and rocks, a bare plain smirched with puddles and mournful black patches, and wore an air of appalling melancholy under the gathering gloom of the clouds in their panic-stricken flight.

'Perhaps the wind's overturned them into a ditch,' Chanteau muttered to himself.

He felt impelled by an urge to investigate. He opened the glass door and ventured in his list slippers on to the gravel of the terrace, which overlooked the village. A few drops of rain, blown by the hurricane, lashed his face, and a terrible gust tore at his jacket of coarse blue wool. But he went on stubbornly, bare-headed, his back bent, and stood leaning his elbows on the parapet to gaze out along the road below. The road ran steeply down between two cliffs, as though the rock had been split with an axe; and the twenty-five or thirty hovels of Bonneville stood on the few yards of soil that had trickled through the crack. Every tide threatened to crush them against the hillside, on their narrow bed of cobbles. To the left there was a small beaching-ground, a bank of sand on which some men, with rhythmical shouts, were hauling up a dozen boats. There were barely two hundred inhabitants, and they got their meagre livelihood from the sea, clinging to the rocks with stupid obstinacy, like limpets. And above the wretched roofs, battered in by the waves every winter, there was nothing to be seen but the church on the right and the Chanteaus' house on the left, half-way up the cliffs, with the road running between them like a ravine. That was all there was of Bonneville.

'Filthy weather, eh?' a voice called out.

Chanteau looked up and recognized the *curé*, Abbé Horteur, a thickset man, built like a peasant, whose red hair was untouched by grey at fifty. In front of the church, in the precinct of the graveyard, the priest had set aside a patch for a kitchen-garden; and he stood there, looking at his early lettuces, hugging his cassock between his legs lest the hurricane should blow it over his head. Chanteau, unable to speak or make himself heard against the wind, had to be content with waving to him.

'I think they're well advised to bring in the boats,' bawled the *curé*. 'By ten o'clock they'd be waltzing.'

And as a sudden gust whipped up his cassock, he disappeared behind the church.

Chanteau had turned round, his shoulders hunched up, in dogged endurance. His eyes brimming with water, he threw a glance at his garden, shrivelled by the sea air, and at the brick house with its double row of five windows whose shutters seemed likely to be wrenched off their fastenings. When the squall had passed he leaned out over the road once more; but Véronique was coming back, waving her arms.

'What's this? You've gone out?... Will you please go in at once, monsieur?'

She caught him up in the passage and scolded him like a naughty child. If he was in pain to-morrow, she'd be the one who'd have to look after him, wouldn't she?

'Didn't you see anything?' he asked in a submissive tone.

'Of course I didn't see anything... Madame's certainly taken shelter somewhere.'

He dared not tell her that she should have ventured further. Now it was his son's absence that worried him most.

'What I did see,' the maid went on, 'was that the whole place is in a hullabaloo. They're afraid they're done for this time... Already last September the Cuches' house was split from top to bottom, and Prouane told me, when he came to ring the Angelus, that it'd certainly be down by to-morrow.'

But just at that moment a tall lad of nineteen ran up the three steps of the porch at one stride. He had a wide forehead, very clear eyes, and a wisp of downy brown beard framing his long face.

'Oh, good, here's Lazare,' said Chanteau with relief. 'How wet you are, my poor boy!'

The young man was hanging his dripping cloak in the hall.

'Well?' asked the father once more.

'Well, there was nobody!' answered Lazare. 'I went as far as Verchemont, and there I waited at the inn, under the shed, with my eyes fixed on the road, which is an absolute stream of mud. Nobody! And then I was afraid you'd be worried, so I came back.'

He had left the *lycée* at Caen the previous August, after passing his *baccalauréat*, and had spent the past eight months wandering about the cliffs, unable to decide on any occupation, absorbed in nothing but music, to the despair of his mother. She had been angry with him when she went off, for he had refused to accompany her to Paris, where she had hopes of finding a job for him. The

whole household was at sixes and sevens, in an atmosphere of bitterness that the closeness of family life only exacerbated.

'Now that I've told you, I'd like to go on as far as Arromanches,' added the young man.

'No, no, it's growing dark,' cried Chanteau. 'Your mother surely won't leave us without news. There's sure to be a telegram . . . Listen! that sounds like a carriage.'

Véronique had opened the door. 'It's Doctor Cazenove's gig,' she announced. 'Was he expected, monsieur? Why, good heavens, it's Madame!'

They all hurried down the steps. A great dog, a cross between a mountain sheep-dog and a Newfoundland, who was asleep in a corner of the hall, rushed forward, barking wildly. The noise brought a small white cat, with a delicate air, on to the threshold; but when she saw the muddy courtyard her tail quivered lightly with disgust, and she sat down primly at the top of the steps, to watch.

Meanwhile a lady of about fifty had jumped out of the gig, with the agility of a young girl. She was small and thin, with hair still jet-black and a pleasant face, spoilt only by a big nose betokening an ambitious nature. The dog had leapt up and laid its paws on her shoulders, trying to kiss her; she grew annoyed with him.

'Now then, Mathieu, let go! Down, you bad dog!'

Lazare came across the courtyard after the dog. He shouted out: 'No accidents, *maman*?'

'No, no,' replied Madame Chanteau.

'Good heavens, we were so worried!' said the father, following his son in spite of the wind. 'Whatever happened?'

'Oh, everything seemed to go wrong,' she explained. 'To begin with the roads are so bad that it took nearly two hours to come from Bayeux. And then at Arromanches one of Malivoire's horses went and hurt its leg, and he couldn't give us another. I thought he'd have to put us up for the night . . . And in the end the doctor was kind enough to lend us his gig. Good Martin brought us . . .'

The coachman, an old man with a wooden leg, a former sailor on whom Cazenove had performed an operation when he was a naval surgeon and who had subsequently remained in the doctor's service, was busy tying up the horse. Madame Chanteau broke off to say to him, 'Martin, help the little girl to get out.'

Nobody had thought of the child. As the hood of the gig hung down very low, nothing could be seen of her but her black skirt and her little black-gloved hands. In any case, without waiting for the coachman's help, she jumped lightly out in her turn. A squall was

blowing, her garments were flapping, wisps of dark hair flew out under the black crape of her hat. She was a big girl for ten, with thick lips and a full pale face, pale as any child would be who had been brought up in a Paris back-shop. Everybody looked at her. Véronique, who had come up to greet her mistress, stopped short and stood aside, with a frozen, jealous face. Mathieu was by no means so reserved; he leapt into the child's arms and licked her face profusely.

'Don't be frightened!' cried Madame Chanteau, 'he's not fierce.'

'Oh, I'm not frightened,' Pauline answered gently, 'I'm very fond of dogs.'

And indeed she remained perfectly calm amidst Mathieu's rude embraces. Her little solemn face lit up with a smile, despite her deep mourning; then she laid a big kiss on the dog's muzzle.

'And what about the people, aren't you going to kiss them too?' went on Madame Chanteau. 'This is your uncle, since you call me your auntie; and this is your cousin, a big rascal who's not as good as you are.'

The child was not in the least shy. She kissed each of them, she found a word for each, with the gracious manners of a little Parisienne already trained in courtesy.

'Thank you very much, uncle, for having me to live with you . . . I'm sure we shall get on well together, cousin . . .'

'But isn't she sweet?' cried Chanteau, delighted.

Lazare was staring at her in surprise, for he had expected her to be much smaller, a silly scared little thing.

'Oh, yes, she's very sweet,' echoed the old lady. 'And brave, you've no idea! The wind was blowing straight at us in that carriage, and blinding us with spray. The hood was flapping like a sail and I made sure a score of times that it was going to be split. Well, she thought it was all great fun, she enjoyed it . . . But what are we doing here? We've no need to get any wetter—here's the rain beginning again.'

She turned round, looking for Véronique. When she saw her standing aloof, with a crabbed face, she said ironically: 'Good day, my lass, how are you? If you are not going to ask me how I am, you might fetch up a bottle for Martin . . . We weren't able to bring our trunks. Malivoire will bring them early to-morrow.'

She broke off, and turned round towards the carriage in sudden alarm. 'And my bag! . . . I was so scared! I was afraid it had fallen out on the way.'

It was a big black leather bag, already worn white at the corners, and she refused pointblank to entrust it to her son. At last every-

one was moving up towards the house, when a fresh squall made them halt breathless before the door. The cat sat there, watching them with interest as they struggled against the wind; and Madame Chanteau had to be told whether Minouche had been good during her absence. At the name Minouche, Pauline gave another solemn little smile. She bent down to stroke the cat, which promptly came to rub against her skirt with its tail held high. Mathieu had begun to bark violently again to celebrate the homecoming, when he saw the family climb up the steps and reach the shelter of the hall at last.

'Oh, it's good to be home,' said the mother. 'I was beginning to think we should never get back . . . Yes, Mathieu, you're a good dog, but leave us in peace. Oh, please Lazare, make him keep quiet, he's deafening me!'

The dog persisted, and the Chanteaus' return into their dining-room took place to the accompaniment of his joyful clamour. They pushed Pauline, the new child of the house, in front of them; behind them came Mathieu, still barking, followed in his turn by Minouche, whose sensitive fur was bristling amidst all this din. Martin, in the kitchen, had already drunk two glasses of wine in quick succession, and now he went off, his wooden leg tapping on the tiled floor, shouting goodnight to everyone. Véronique had been warming up the joint at the fire. She looked in and asked: 'Are you going to eat?'

'I should say so, it's seven o'clock,' said Chanteau. 'Only, my lass, we'd better wait till Madame and the little girl have changed their clothes.'

'But I haven't got Pauline's trunk,' pointed out Madame Chanteau. 'Luckily we're not wet underneath . . . Take off your coat and hat, darling. Help her, won't you, Véronique . . . And take her shoes off too . . . I've got things here . . .'

The maid had to kneel in front of the child, who was sitting down. Meanwhile the old lady pulled out of her bag a pair of small felt slippers, which she herself put on the child's feet. Then she held out her own feet to be unshod, and dipped once more into her bag, emerging with a pair of old shoes for herself.

'Well, shall I dish up?' asked Véronique once more.

'Presently . . . Pauline, come into the kitchen to wash your hands and sponge your face . . . We're dying of hunger, we'll have a good clean-up later on.'

Pauline reappeared first, leaving her aunt with her face over a basin. Chanteau had resumed his place in front of the fire, sunk deep in his big yellow velvet armchair; and he was rubbing his legs

with an automatic gesture, in dread of an imminent attack, while Lazare cut slices of bread, standing at the table, where, for over an hour, four places had been laid. The two men, feeling slightly embarrassed, smiled at the child but could find nothing to say. She was calmly examining the dining-room with its walnut furniture, her eyes wandering from the sideboard and the half-dozen chairs to the hanging lamp of polished brass, her attention arrested particularly by five framed lithographs, the Four Seasons and a View of Vesuvius, which stood out against the brown wall-paper. No doubt the sham panelling of painted oak with its chalky scratches, the floor stained with old grease-spots, the general air of neglect of this communal living-room, made her homesick for the handsome marble shop that she had left the day before, for her eyes grew sad and she seemed for a moment to guess at the secret antagonisms latent under the apparent good-humour of this unfamiliar environment. Finally her gaze, after lingering over a very ancient barometer in a gilt wooden case, fastened on a strange construction that took up the whole mantelpiece, standing under a glass cover and fastened at the angles with thin strips of blue paper. It looked like a toy, a miniature wooden bridge, but one of extraordinary complicated construction.

‘That was made by your great-uncle,’ explained Chanteau, glad to have found a topic of conversation. ‘Yes, my father began by being a carpenter. I’ve always kept his masterpiece.’

He was not ashamed of his origins, and Madame Chanteau had to put up with the bridge on the mantelpiece, despite the annoyance which this cumbrous curio caused her by reminding her that she had married the son of a workman. But the little girl had already stopped listening to her uncle; she had just caught sight of the immense horizon outside, and she crossed the room swiftly and took up her stand in front of the window, the muslin curtains of which were held back by cotton loops. Since leaving Paris, she had been obsessed by the thought of the sea. She dreamed of it, she kept on questioning her aunt in the train, wanting to know, at every hillside that they passed, whether the sea lay behind those mountains. At last, on the beach at Arromanches, she had fallen silent, her bosom heaving with a great sigh; then, from Arromanches to Bonneville, she had constantly thrust her head out of the carriage window, in spite of the wind, to watch the sea as it followed them. And now there was the sea still; it would be there always, like something that belonged to her. Slowly, with her eyes, she seemed to be making it her own.