THE KILL

by Emile Zola

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INTRODUCTION

THE ironical disposition of events in history, however we may care to explain it, is a never ending source of diversion. It tempers the solemn course of the past with a pleasant measure of absurdity. Zola planned his large cycle of novels to portray the decline of society under the Second Empire, yet he was wholly taken unawares when that Empire actually fell. During the months which preceded Napoleon III's disastrous campaign against the Germans—months of feverish, inadequate military preparation, political rumour and court intrigue—Zola, accompanied by his wife, was visiting the Jardin des Plantes and very earnestly, rather laboriously, taking note of the exact names of the tropical plants in the hothouses. Such exact cataloguing was the necessary prelude in Zola's scheme of things to writing the scenes of seduction and lust among the newly-moneyed classes of the Second Empire, scenes appropriately to be played out in a hothouse. When war broke out, Zola, with two female dependants and a poor physique, was exempted from military service. He made his way to his native Provence and eked out a miserable livelihood by chance journalism. No scheme could have been more stillborn than the projected cycle of the Rougon Macquart. The first volume *La Fortune des Rougons* had been published comparatively unnoticed. Although the precious manuscript of *La Curée*, the second in the projected cycle, went with Zola to the Midi, he was too occupied there and in Bordeaux with day to day living to be able to work on it. But his single-minded determination was shown immediately he was able to return to Paris. Despite the fact that part of the city was in the hands of the moderate Republicans and part in the hands of the Communards, Zola's concern was solely for securing the publication of his new novel, and, in his disregard for mere political differences, he found himself arrested by each side in the course of the same twenty-four

hours. It might well be suggested that a man who had so little prophetic sense that he was taken by surprise when so creaking a structure as Napoleon III's Empire finally fell, a man who felt the pressure of social forces so little that he could regard the class-warfare of the Commune as a tiresome distraction, was of all men the least suited to write the imaginative chronicle of his age. Yet such a suggestion is really quite superficial. Insight may be most deeply penetrating without attempting that rather arbitrary, jigsaw puzzle dovetailing of events, which is the basis of political foresight. Whilst the events of the last twenty years have shown that the writer who is ultimately most committed to his time is not necessarily the most immediately politically partisan. Zola observed, and observed most exactly, the manners of his age, without sacrificing one inch of the egotism which made his imaginative reconstruction of the Second Empire infinitely more real and important to him than the actual course of history. Above all, he was deeply absorbed in himself and there is a sense, I suspect, in which self-knowledge is for a writer the sole means of apprehending the world in which he lives.

The day of double arrest decided Zola that Paris was no place in which to risk his precious enterprise. He moved from his house in Batignolles to Bonnière and there sat down to finish *La Curée*. The serialisation in the newspaper *La Cloche* began in September 1871 before the work was completed. Not many instalments had appeared before the outside world once more interfered. The censor of the Third Republic was unwilling to accept the scene of Renee's seduction in the Café Riche by her stepson, even though this was an attack on the morals of the fallen régime. Serialization was suspended and Zola, out of friendship for *La Cloche*'s editor Louis Ulbach, wrote a letter of apology. *La Curée* gained few readers, for Lacroix, the publishing house on which the publication of the Rougon Macquart chronicle depended, had always been in a precarious financial position. It soon failed completely. "The high project," at which, Henry James said, "imagination stood in awe at the very wonder," seemed sadly likely to peter out in obscurity.

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But true to the best traditions of biography, Zola's darkest hour, in fact, heralded the dawn. Lacroix had always been a pis-aller publisher, and the terms upon which Zola was to write for them would have crippled his life. Unlikely as it seemed that a substantial publisher would be willing to take on so precarious a venture, or one whose infant reputation was already so sullied in correct literary circles. The principle of inheritance, which Zola found so unpleasant when it gave his friend Cézanne a small private income, came to his rescue. The wealthy, firmly established publishing firm of Charpentier had recently passed into the hands of young Georges Charpentier; and it was he who, with the backing of Maurice Dreyfous, gave Zola, in this desperate time, the backing he had always hoped for. The publication of the Rougon Macquart series by Charpentier, which followed *La Curée*, brought good to everyone. Charpentier's trust and generosity ensured the author the security he needed in order to write; the success of the novels ultimately brought huge fortunes to publisher and author alike. Young Madame Charpentier found in Zola the lion her salon needed, while he gained in her a social, mondaine adviser of the greatest help to his future career. It is interesting to speculate what his publisher's wife, who had her foot securely on the social ladder, made of *La Curée*, the novel of high society by a young man who knew no more of the smart world than an occasional newspaper soirée.

In the course of the great Rougon Macquart cycle, Zola was to rush fearlessly into social worlds far above and far below his own experience. It was the outstanding greatness of his own imaginative powers and his intuitive sympathies, that he could take the carefully amassed facts of sociology, and investing them with the violence of his own despairs and ambitions, bring to life a strange world of his own, at once intensely factual and highly distorted. The courage required to write *La Curée* is, however, the most remarkable audacity of his career. With nothing to guide him but the blue books of the State Auditor's office, the fashion columns of the newspapers, the sales inventories of rich houses and the catalogue of

contents of the hothouses of the Jardin des Plantes, he set out to picture the extravagances, the corruption, the restless sexual boredom of the great nouveau riche world of the Second Empire speculators.

Of course, the reading of a few chapters of *La Curée*, in particular those concerning the financial complications of Aristide Saccard's exploitation of the Haussmann real estate boom, will show that without the force of Balzac's influence upon his imagination, Zola could not have succeeded. But, it is also true, as any Balzacian will immediately and indignantly assert, that *La Curée* is no imitation of Balzac. There is much that is ragged and unassimilated in *La Curée*, much again that borders on the absurd, but the faults are those of a future master in his own right, not of a bungling imitator. It is a matter of fact that at the time when Zola wrote *La Curée*, he had only just attained a precarious place in bourgeois domesticity, had only just left penury and starvation behind him; it is also a matter of fact that the circles of which he wrote were as distant from him as the moon, but that fact does not emerge. Whatever its occasional crudities and overwriting, there is nothing that might not have come from the pen of a young, somewhat over-intense frequenter of Second Empire salons. In this respect it is notable that even his most hostile critics, for example the young Paul Bourget, in their diatribes against the immoral tone of the book, the depraved pictures of society that it gave, attacked *La Curée* for its too great realism, not for its unreality. All this, of course, is to say no more than that Zola had at an early age the highest power of imaginative assimilation with social circles he did not know, that he was in fact a great novelist. *La Curée*, however, is one of the most interesting of Zola's novels, because it is the first in which this intuitive gift was given full rein.

It is unfortunately true, however, that the early works of great novelists receive considerable attention for the light that they throw on the mature works of their authors, although their intrinsic literary merit is small. This, of course, makes them of peculiar interest to the student of literary history or to the specialised critic,

but is of small comfort to the general reader who is led into reading them by the power of the author's name. Let me say frankly then that *La Curée* is not among the four or five greatest of Zola's novels, but it is, I think, a very absorbing and powerful book, rich in the entertainment value which rightly counts highest among the demands of the ordinary reader, and of very remarkable interest to the more serious literary critic for its sustained dramatic force and its build-up of emotional tension through carefully constructed set pieces.

The story is presented in two interwoven threads: the financial speculations of Aristide Saccard, a member of the Rougon family who has descended upon Paris from Provence in order to share in the spoils of the speculators and builders, who are pulling down the narrow medieval streets and the elegant hotels of the ancien régime to make way for the avenues and boulevards we now know. He is quickly disencumbered of his provincial wife and his son Maxime is sent away to school in Provence. Aided by his sister Sidonie, a richly Balzacian woman who might come from the pages of *Cousine Bette*, he marries a young girl Renée of the old merchant classes of Paris whose pregnancy makes her an easy prey to marital adventurers. Since Aristide has got her on easy terms, with an eye to her *dot*, which is house property in an area scheduled for improvement, he is never alive to her youth and beauty. He acquires the high class demi-mondaine Laure as a mistress; his beautiful, social hostess young wife has her lovers. The situation, which is brilliantly portrayed, might have lasted for ever with an increasingly money-obsessed husband and an increasingly bored extravagant wife. But into the household comes Maxime from his school, thirteen years of age, precocious, idle, depraved and pretty. The boy is immediately the doll of his bored young stepmother and is taken by her to every dress show, to her friend's boudoirs, until he seems to drip with the small talk, the perfumes and the amours of these smart young married women. Dress and scandal make up the lives of these two pretty hangers-on of the swindler. Little by little, as Maxime grows up, seduces the servant girl, takes

mistresses, has affairs with his stepmother's friends, Renée finds herself in love with home. Boredom, the excitement of a novel, vicious situation, the easy, garçon relationship between them, all point to this. And so comes about the theme of the novel which Zola called "The modern Phèdre", and "a study in money and the flesh". For students of Zola's particular, somewhat strange conception of sexual morality, *La Curée* is a key novel. It is not so much the illicit nature of Renée's love for Maxime, nor its half incestuous nature that makes it tragic, but the manner in which an easy, somewhat vicious, pleasure-seeking friendship between two young people slips into passion and thence to satiety and disaster. If Maxime is the effeminate dandy, Renée is the eager, boyish pursuer. The whole affair is, in Zola's eyes, the forbidden fruit which was afterwards to destroy L'Abbé Mouret in his garden of Paradou, the forbidden androgynous pleasure of sex pursued for fun rather than for procreation. It is a curiously Catholic view for the great anti-Catholic writer. It is perhaps because it touched Zola's own secret desires and fears so deeply that the descriptions of Renée's and Maxime's love-making are so remarkably powerful. The seduction in the private room at the Café Riche, the adultery on the bear skin in the great hothouse might so easily have been absurd, a mixture of Maurice Dekobra and Disraeli; but they are not: they are exciting, moving and extraordinarily vivid. In fact, throughout this novel of financial scheming and hothouse love there runs that extraordinary visual sense of Zola's, giving us a larger than life picture so clearly, so vividly that we find it more convincing than the real world.

ANGUS WILSON.

CHAPTER I

On the drive home, the calash could make but little way against the obstruction of carriages returning by the edge of the lake. At one moment the block became such that it was even necessary to pull up.

The sun was setting in a pale gray October sky, streaked on the horizon with thin clouds. One last ray, falling from the distant shrubberies of the cascade, pierced the roadway, and flooded the long array of stationary carriages with pale red light. The golden glints, the bright flashes thrown by the wheels, seemed to have settled along the straw-coloured edges of the calash, while the dark-blue panels reflected bits of the surrounding landscape. And higher up, full in the red light that lit them up from behind, and gave effulgence to the brass buttons of their capes half-folded across the back of the box, sat the coachman and footman, in their dark-blue liveries, their drab breeches, and their yellow-and-black striped waist-coats, erect, solemn and patient, after the manner of well-bred servants who are in no way put out by a block of carriages. Their hats, adorned with black cockades, looked very dignified. The horses alone, a pair of splendid bays, snorted with impatience.

"Look," said Maxime, "Laure d'Aurigny, over there, in that brougham. . . . Do look, Renée."

Renée raised herself slightly, and blinked her eyes with the exquisite grimace caused by the shortness of her sight.

"I thought she had vanished from the scene," said Renée. . . . "She has changed the colour of her hair, has she not?"

"Yes," replied Maxime, laughing; "her new lover hates red."

Awakened from the melancholy dream that for an hour had kept her silent, stretched out in the back seat of the carriage as in an invalid's long-chair, Renée leaned forward and looked, resting her hand on the low door of the calash. Over a gown consisting of a

mauve silk polonaise and tunic, trimmed with wide plaited flounces, she wore a little coat of white cloth with mauve velvet lapels, which gave her a look of great smartness. Her strange, pale, fawn-coloured hair, whose shade recalled the colour of good butter, was barely concealed by a tiny bonnet adorned with a cluster of Bengal roses. She continued to screw up her eyes with her look of an impertinent boy, her pure forehead furrowed by one long wrinkle, her upper lip protruding like a sulky child's. Then, finding that she could not see, she took her eye-glass, a man's double eye-glass framed in tortoise-shell, and, holding it in her hand without placing it on her nose, at her ease examined the fat Laure d'Aurigny, with an air of absolute calmness.

The carriages were still blocked. Among the massed dark patches made by the long line of broughams, of which numbers that autumn afternoon had crowded to the Bois, gleamed the glass of a carriage-window, the bit of a bridle, the plated socket of a lamp, the braid on the livery of a lackey perched on his box. Here and there a bit of stuff, a bit of a woman's dress, silk or velvet, flashed from an open landau. Little by little a deep silence had taken the place of all the bustle that now stood dead and motionless. The occupants of the carriages could distinguish the conversation of the people on foot. Silent glances were exchanged from window to window; and all ceased talking during this wait, whose silence was broken only by the creaking of a set of harness, or the impatient pawing of a horse's hoof. The blurred voices of the Bois died away in the distance.

All Paris was there, in spite of the lateness of the season: the Duchesse de Sternich, in a chariot; Mme. de Lauwerens, in a smart victoria and pair; the Baronne de Meinhold, in an enchanting light-brown cab; the Comtesse Vanska, with her piebald ponies; Mme. Daste, with her famous black steppers; Mme. de Guende and Mme. Teissière in a brougham; little Sylvia in a dark-blue landau. And then there was Don Carlos, in mourning, with his solemn, old-fashioned liveries; and Selim Pasha, with his fez and without his tutor; the Duchesse de Rozan, in a miniature brougham, with her powdered livery; the Comte de Chibray, in a dog-cart; Mr.

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Simpson, driving his perfectly-appointed drag; and the whole American colony. Then, finally, two Academicians in a hired cab.

The front carriages were released, and one by one the whole line began to move slowly on. It resembled an awakening. A thousand lively coruscations sprang up, quick flashes played among the wheels, sparks flew from the horses' harness. On the ground, on the trees, were broad reflections of trotting glass. This glitter of wheels and harness, this blaze of varnished panels glowing with the red gleam of the setting sun, the bright notes of colour cast by the dazzling liveries perched up full against the sky, and by the rich costumes projecting beyond the carriage-doors, were carried along amid a hollow, sustained rumbling sound, timed by the trot of the horses. And the procession went on, with the same noise, the same effects of light, unceasingly and with one impulse, as though the foremost carriages were dragging all the others behind them.

Renée yielded to the first slight jolt of the calash, and lowering her eye-glass, threw herself back on the cushions. Shivering, she drew towards her a corner of the bearskin that filled the body of the carriage as with a sheet of silky snow, and plunged her gloved hands into the long, soft, curly hair. The wind began to blow from the North. The warm October day, which had given the Bois an aftermath of spring and brought the great ladies out in open carriages, threatened to end in a bitterly cold evening.

For a moment Renée remained huddled in the warmth of her corner, giving way to the pleasurable lullaby of wheels turning before her. Then, raising her head, towards Maxime, whose eyes were calmly undressing the women spread out in the adjacent broughams and landaus:

"Tell me," she said, "do you really think that Laure d'Aurigny handsome? How you sang her praises the other day, when they were discussing the sale of her diamonds! . . . By the way, did you not see the necklace and the aigrette your father bought me at the sale?"

"Yes, he does things well," said Maxime, without answering, laughing mischievously. "He finds means to pay Laure's debts and to give diamonds to his wife."

Renée made a slight movement with her shoulders.

"Wretch!" she murmured, with a smile.

But Maxime was leaning forward, following with his gaze a lady whose green dress interested him. Renée had thrown back her head and with half-closed eyes glanced listlessly at the two sides of the avenue, seeing nothing. On the right, copses and low-cut plantations with reddened leaves and slender branches passed slowly by; at intervals, on the track reserved for riders, slim-waisted gentlemen galloped past, their steeds raising little clouds of fine dust behind them. On the left, at the foot of the narrow grass-plots that run down intersected by flower-beds and shrubs, the lake, clear as crystal, without a ripple, lay as though neatly trimmed along its edges by the gardeners' spades; and on the further side of this translucent mirror, the two islands, with between them the gray bar formed by the connecting bridge, displayed their smiling slopes and the theatrical outlines of fir-trees and evergreens, whose black foliage, resembling the fringe of curtains cunningly draped along the edge of the horizon, was reflected in the water. This scrap of nature, that seemed like a newly-painted piece of scenery, lay bathed in a faint shadow, in a pale blue vapour which succeeded in lending to the background an exquisite charm, an air of entrancing artificiality. On the other bank, the Châlet des Iles, as though newly varnished, shone like an usused toy; and the paths of yellow sand, the narrow garden walks that wind among the lawns and run along the lake, edged with iron hoops in imitation of rustic woodwork, stood out more curiously, in this last hour of daylight, against the softened green of grass and water.

Accustomed to the ingenious charms of this perspective, Renée, once more yielding to her languor, had lowered her eyelids altogether, and looked only at her slender fingers twisting the long hairs of the bearskin. But there came a jolt in the even trot of the line of carriages. And, raising her head, she nodded to two ladies lolling languidly, amorously, side by side, in a chariot which was noisily leaving the road that skirts the lake, in order to go down one of the side avenues. The Marquise d'Espanet, whose husband, lately

an aide-de-camp to the Emperor, had just created a great scandal by allying himself with the discontented members of the old nobility, was one of the most prominent leaders of society of the Second Empire; her companion, Mme. Haffner, was the wife of a celebrated manufacturer of Colmar, a millionaire twenty times over, whom the Empire was transforming into a politician. Renée, a schoolfellow of the two inseparables, as people nicknamed them with a knowing air, called them by their Christian names, Adeline and Suzanne.

As, after smiling to them, she was about to sink afresh into her corner, a laugh from Maxime made her turn round.

"No, really, I feel too sad: don't laugh, I mean what I say," she said, seeing that the young man was watching her ironically, making merry over her huddled attitude.

Maxime put on a comedy voice:

"How unhappy we are: how jealous!"

She seemed quite amazed.

"I!" she said. "Jealous what of?"

And then added, with a pout of contempt, as though remembering:

"Ah, to be sure, that fat Laure! I had not given her a thought, believe me. If Aristide has, as you say, paid that woman's debts and saved her from having to pack up her trunks, it only proves that he is less fond of money than I thought. This will restore him to the ladies' good graces. . . . The dear man, I leave him every liberty."

She smiled, and pronounced the words "the dear man" in a voice full of friendly indifference. And suddenly, becoming very sad again, casting around her the despairing glance of women who do not know in what form of amusement to take refuge, she murmured:

"Oh, I should like to. . . . But no, I am not jealous, not at all jealous."

She stopped, doubtfully:

"You see, I am bored," she said at last, abruptly.

Then she sat silent, with her lips pressed together. The line of

carriages still rolled along the lake with its even trot and a noise singularly resembling a distant water-fall. Now, on the left, there rose, between the water and the roadway, little bushes of evergreens with thin straight stems, forming curious little clusters of pillars. On the right, the copses and plantations had come to an end; the Bois opened out into broad lawns, into vast expanses of grass, with here and there a clump of tall trees; the green-sward ran on, with gentle undulations, to the Porte de la Muette, whose low gates, that seemed like a piece of black lace stretched on the level of the ground, could be distinguished at a very great distance; and on the slopes, at the places where the undulations sank in, the grass seemed quite blue. Renée stared fixedly before her, as though this widening of the horizon, these gentle meadows, soaked in the evening air, had caused her to feel more keenly the void of her existence.

After a pause she repeated, querulously:

"Oh, I am bored, bored to death."

"This is not amusing, you know," said Maxime, calmly. "Your nerves are out of order, undoubtedly."

Renée threw herself back in the carriage.

"Yes, my nerves are out of order," she replied dryly.

Then she became motherly:

"I am growing old, my dear child; I shall soon be thirty. It's terrible. Nothing gives me pleasure. . . . You, who are twenty, cannot know . . ."

"Was it to hear your confession that you brought me out?" interrupted the young man. "It would take the devil of a long time."

She received this impertinence with a faint smile, as though it were the outburst of a spoilt child that knows no restraint.

"I should recommend you to complain," continued Maxime. "You spend more than a hundred thousand francs a year on your dress, you live in a sumptuous house, you have splendid horses, your caprices are law, and the papers discuss each of your new gowns as an event of the most serious importance; the women envy you, the men would give ten years of their lives for leave to kiss the tips of your fingers . . . Is what I say true?"

She nodded affirmatively, without replying. Her eyes cast down, she had resumed her task of curling the hairs of the bearskin.

"Come, don't be modest," Maxime continued; "confess roundly that you are one of the pillars of the Second Empire. We need not hide these things from one another. Wherever you go, at the Tuileries, at the houses of ministers, at the houses of mere millionaires, high or low, you reign a queen. There is not a pleasure of which you have not had your fill, and if I dared, if the respect I owe you did not restrain me, I should say . . ."

He paused for a few seconds, laughing, then finished his sentence cavalierly:

"I should say you had bitten at every apple."

She moved no muscle.

"And you are bored!" resumed the young man, with droll vivacity. "But it's scandalous! . . . What is it you want? What on earth do you dream of?"

She shrugged her shoulders to imply that she did not know. Though she kept her head down, Maxime was able to see that she looked so serious, so melancholy, that he thought it best to hold his tongue. He watched the line of carriages, which, when they reached the end of the lake, spread out, filling the whole of the open space. The carriages, packed less closely, swept round with majestic grace; the quicker trot of the horses sounded noisily on the hard ground.

The calash, on going the round to joint the line, rocked in a way that filled Maxime with vague enjoyment. Then, yielding to his wish to crush Renée:

"Look here," he said, "you deserve to ride in a cab! That would serve you right! . . . Why, look at these people returning to Paris, people who are all at your feet. They hail you as their queen, and your sweetheart, M. de Mussy, can hardly refrain from blowing kisses to you."

A horseman was, in fact, bowing to Renée. Maxime had been talking in a hypocritical, mocking voice. But Renée barely turned round, and shrugged her shoulders. At last the young man made a gesture of despair.

"Really," he said; "have we come to that? . . . But, good God, you have everything: what do you want more?"

Renée raised her head. In her eyes was a glow of light, the ardent desire of unsatisfied curiosity.

"I want something different," she replied, in a low voice.

"But since you have everything," resumed Maxime laughing, "there is nothing different. . . . What is the 'something different'?"

"What?" she repeated.

And she did not continue. She had turned right round, and was watching the strange picture fading behind her. It was almost night; twilight was falling slowly like fine ashes. The lake, seen from the front, in the pale daylight that still hovered over the water, became rounder, like a huge tin dish; on either side, the plantations of evergreens, whose slim straight stems seemed to issue from its slumbering surface, assumed at this hour the appearance of purple colonnades, delineating with the evenness of their architecture the studied curves of the shores; and again, in the background, rose shrubberies, confused masses of foliage, whose large black patches closed up the horizon. Behind these patches shone the glow of the expiring sunset, that set fire to but a small portion of the grey immensity. Above this placid lake, these low copses, this singularly flat perspective, stretched the vault of heaven, infinite, deepened and widened. This great slice of sky hanging over this small morsel of nature caused a thrill, an undefinable sadness; and from these paling heights fell so deep an autumnal melancholy, so sweet and so heart-breaking a darkness, that the Bois, wound little by little in a shadowy shroud, lost its mundane graces, widened, full of the puissant charm that forests have. The trot of the carriages, whose bright colouring was swept away in the twilight, sounded like the distant voices of leaves and running water. All died away as it went. In the centre of the lake, in the general evanescence, the lateen sail of the great pleasure-boat stood out, strongly defined against the glow of the sunset. And it was no longer possible to distinguish anything but this sail, this triangle of yellow canvas, immeasurably enlarged.

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