

Villa des Roses

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I. Monsieur and Madame Brulot

The Villa des Roses, where the Brulots served meals and let rooms, was in the rue d'Armaillé, an unimposing street in the otherwise spaciouly laid out Quartier des Ternes¹. And what applied to the street applied equally to the house; it was only two storeys high, while the whole district was full of buildings with five or six floors, which towered above the Villa on either side. This gave the boarding-house something of the look of a country house, surrounded and hemmed in by the surging tide of the metropolis. But no one had ever come up with an acceptable explanation for the descriptive tag 'des Roses'. True, there was a garden attached to the house, which in itself is quite a rarity in Paris, but since Monsieur and Madame Brulot had moved in – more than sixteen years previously – no one had lifted so much as a finger towards its upkeep, so that all roses and other flowers were things of the past. Moreover, it got very little sun, as the neighbouring houses cast their giant shadows over the whole plot. The only thing able to survive such conditions was the grass, thriving as it does all the more the less it is cared for, and delighting in neglected masonry and incipient ruins.

Making the best of a bad job, Madame Brulot had soon decided to keep chickens, and about thirty of them now scratched about in the 'grounds' of the Villa. And as though Paris did not exist and the sun never set on their empire, the creatures laid eggs, which were sold in town by Madame at twenty centimes apiece. For her garrison she bought Italian eggs at half the price, and secreted them about the garden early in the morning, after which they were carried triumphantly into the kitchen. Though there might be the occasional complaint about the meat dishes or the coffee, on the subject of the eggs the ladies and gentlemen were all agreed: they were quite simply without equal anywhere in town.

Affixed to the wall next to the front door was a black noticeboard, which carried the following announcement in a gilt lettering:

¹ The rue d'Armaillé and the Quartier des Ternes are located in the west of Paris, in the 17th *arrondissement*.

VILLA DES ROSES
MAISON C.A. BRULOT

PENSION DE FAMILLE DE PREMIER ORDRE
TOUT LE CONFORT MODERNE GRAND PARC POUR ENFANTS

PRIX DIVERS ET À CONVENIR

DÉJEUNERS ET DINERS AU CACHET

ENGLISH SPOKEN

‘First-class family boarding-house’ was something of an exaggeration. As far as ‘modern conveniences’ were concerned, these consisted largely of the fact that guests were immediately given a front-door key and so could come and go as they pleased at night without having to get anyone out of bed. On the other hand, the place did not run to electric lighting or a bathroom. Whenever some newcomer, starting to feel grubby after a week or so, inquired about them, Madame Brulot would explain that she had decided to forgo both newfangled inventions because of the attendant dangers. The gutting of the Bazar de la Charité department store, in which several hundred people lost their lives, had in Madame Brulot’s opinion been caused by a short circuit in the electrical system, while just across the road from the Villa a bailiff of less than forty had suffocated in his bath, without the neighbours hearing so much as a cry for help.

‘Lunch and dinner extra’ meant that one could take meals at midday or in the evening without being a resident, so that the number of mouths to feed tended to fluctuate somewhat. ‘English spoken’ dated from the time when one of the paying guests was a gentleman who had lived in London and liked to show off his English. Madame Brulot still knew about five words, such as ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘money’, ‘room’ and dinner’.

Let us render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. It should be said in Madame Brulot’s favour that the food, apart from one or two minor items and the egg business, was really not all that bad. She bought the ingredients personally and the preparation was entrusted to a kitchen maid, helped by a chambermaid who usually also had some notion of cookery. The fare, at least for the two large communal meals which began at twelve noon and seven in the evening respectively, was the same for all guests. And yet the prices they paid varied considerably. Several factors were more or less decisive in determining price: firstly the size, location and furnishings of the room one occupied, the quantity of food one consumed, the financial reputation of one’s country or origin (Americans, for example, were as a rule charged more than Poles or Armenians), and finally the healthy and age of guests as this affected the degree of nuisance they caused. Accordingly, guests were always accepted for a trial period only, be it a week or a month, according to the impression they made on Madame Brulot at the initial interview, and with the weight and cubic capacity of accompanying luggage also begin taken into account. However, this last factor had become less and less decisive since Madame Brulot had had deeply distressing experiences with some outsize suitcases.

Though she had time enough over the years to perfect her knowledge of a subject which was after all part and parcel of her trade, Madame Brulot was still often badly mistaken in her assessment of

the newcomers. She could not, for example, entirely rid herself of the preconceived notion that fat people usually have large appetites for food and drink and thin people small ones, without reflecting that the obese are often forced to observe moderation while skinny folk frequently have tapeworms, with of course disastrous results for any boarding-house. In addition, she continued to accept the occasional defaulter, though each time she swore by God and all the saints that she would never be caught out again. However, it was no easy task to keep mangy sheep out of an establishment whose good name one was anxious to preserve by not requiring payment in advance, for as is always the case in business the Brulots were constantly exposed to all kinds of schemes, ruses and sharp practices dreamt up by unscrupulous competitors.

One example will suffice. It so happened that Madame Durand, who ran the boarding-house Sweet Home in the same neighbourhood, had once taken in a delegation of four Serbian gentlemen dispatched to Paris by their government to make a thorough study of the latest developments in fire-fighting and the education of backward children. They were given nothing but the best, since everything was billed to the Serbian legation, the head of which was even invited to dinner so that he could be introduced to Madame Durand, who felt extremely honoured by such kind consideration. Until one day a chap from Brussels stopped off at Sweet Home, and, hearing the gentlemen talking to each other, recognized the four as hailing from his home town. Great was Madame Durand's consternation, especially since it had been agreed that a month's notice should be given, meaning that the delegation was entitled to stay on for another thirty-one days. After much argument back and forth, a mutually acceptable compromise was arrived at. The gentlemen were prepared to leave Sweet Home immediately, on condition that Madame Durand gave her word of honour not to involve the police, and directed the members of the delegation to a respectable *pension* where they could resume their activities. Both conditions were strictly adhered to, and so it was that the four Serbians wound up at the Villa des Roses, where they lived for five months.

So that one is bound to admit that the forty-five-year-old Madame Brulot was faced with an onerous task, particularly in view of the fact that her husband concerned himself very little with the business and that Madame also worked as an inspector for the city's Poor Relief Committee. Her job consisted of paying visits to destitute new mothers every other day, which brought her in an additional two hundred and fifty francs a month.

Madame was careful to keep the boarding-house's accounts separate from the money she earned with the Poor Relief Committee, and whenever, as in a case like that of the Serbians, she was forced to dip into her private kitty, she never failed to ask Monsieur Brulot whether or not he now realized that she was losing her own money.

Rumour had it that Madame Brulot actually made much more than two hundred and fifty francs a month from the Committee, and was the special protégée of the head of her department. This, so it was said, was the real reason why she had already received two decorations and a diploma. The diploma hung on the wall in the 'banqueting room', and she always pinned on her decorations before setting off on her rounds.

Whatever the truth of the matter, one thing that was certain was that so-called *petits bleus* would often arrive for Madame, that is, notes which were sent all over the city by air pressure through a system of tubes and usually reached the addressee within the hour – definitely not a good sign. But of course she was old and wise enough to know what to do and what not to do.

Madame Brulot was not unpleasant in appearance, although she lacked distinction on account of the excessive fleshiness of her nose, which resembled a Bourbon nose they way backstreet mongrels are sometimes reminiscent of pedigree fox terriers. The reason was that she suffered from an ailment principally characterized by an itching and swelling of the membranes of her nose and mouth whenever she ate certain fruits or vegetables, especially strawberries and bananas, and as a result of the constant rubbing to alleviate the itching her nose had swollen and developed a number of strange folds which gave her a permanently aggrieved expression. Madame Brulot was corpulent, though not excessively so for her age; she had a heart of gold, made her own hats, and was able to make herself look quite attractive with the help of a few cheap accessories.

Monsieur C.A. Brulot was twenty years older than his wife, around sixty-five, and had, it seemed, been a village notary by profession. Madame Brulot had once borne him a son, who had died at the age of six and was buried in the village churchyard. This was one of the few events which had ever moved Monsieur Brulot deeply, but Madame Brulot particularly had wept incessantly, and for week on end had stood outside the cemetery gates after closing time so as to be able to watch the little bush which grew on the grave. According to Monsieur Brulot this had been the main reason why he had sold his practice and come to Paris to run the Villa des Roses. He had hoped that his wife would find more to take her out of herself in the capital, and in that respect at least his expectations were not disappointed. However, his successor had paid him only in part or had played some other dastardly trick on him, since even now, a good sixteen years later, Monsieur Brulot was said to be still involved in litigation in pursuit of his claim. To this end he was forced, three or four times a year, to call on his wife's capital, and each time she solemnly assured him that this was the last time.

Monsieur Brulot had a bald patch, fringed with long grey hair, and still wore a black skullcap, the only item he had retained from his days as a notary. He had also served in the army in the war of 1870 and been taken prisoner by the Germans,² which was why he still sported a fairly warlike moustache and goatee beard. In the afternoons, after the plates and glasses had been cleared away, he could be seen sitting in the so-called banqueting room, up to his ears in the dossiers pertaining to his case, and whenever Madame Brulot appeared he would mutter, 'I'll get that scoundrel yet.' Monsieur Brulot suffered alternately from gout, head and chest colds, afflictions of the gall-bladder and liver, and diabetes, but without succumbing to any of them, and, when he was laid up in bed and Madame was away, none of the maids dared to go into his room when he called them to give him his medicines. Consequently they had not the least respect for his age and did not think twice about knocking his feet with their scrubbing brushes when cleaning the banqueting room.

For years Madame had kept a tiny monkey, a marmoset, which she called *mon fils* and which brought some comfort to her childless existence. When she went for walks and the weather was not too raw, she would tuck the creature, which apart from its long tail was smaller than a clenched fist, between her dress and coat, where it blended in so well with her cheap furs that not even its head was visible.

'Chico', for that was his name, was allowed to sit at table with the grown-ups, and went into particular raptures when Madame let him eat out of her mouth. His little eyes would glisten and he would let out a sound rather like the chirp of a sparrow and at the same time reminiscent of a human giggle. Chico slept between Madame and Monsieur Brulot and was jealous of all the gentlemen at the Villa except for the old notary. Madame was utterly devoted to him; when she was once faced with the choice between Chico and a very respectable English couple who paid very

² The reference is to the Franco-Prussian war.

well but preferred not to share the table with him, she had not hesitated to sacrifice her English guests for the monkey. And Chico fully reciprocated his mistress's affection. When it was too cold for her to take him with her, he would greet her return with shrieks and strange gestures, but sometimes he had fits of stubbornness and refused to take food from her.

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II. Madame Gendron

For a long time the ninety-two-year-old Madame Gendron had been the financial mainstay of the Villa des Roses. While the minimum charge for bed and board at Madame Brulot's was as low as five francs a day, the lady in question paid eighteen francs, not including the countless extra items of expense incurred by her stay at the Villa. She too had known cheaper days, when she had been ten or so years younger and could still wash herself unaided, but Madame Brulot had regularly increased her monthly board as the old lady got more and more doddery until it had reached the above-mentioned figure. The rate of twenty-five francs a day would only apply after she had, God willing, reached her hundredth birthdays.

Madame Gendron was reputed to be rich, but estimates of the size of her fortune tended to vary widely. Pessimists talked of a mere five hundred thousand francs, optimists of three million. However, she no longer managed the money in question herself since she was no longer capable of managing even her own body. This was the responsibility of Monsieur Garousse, a Paris businessman who acted as intermediary between Madame Gendron and her son, a doctor in Dunkerque. For some reason or other it was impossible for Dr Gendron to have his mother at home with him. And anyway, he assured them, Mama was particularly fond of Paris, although her opinion was never sought. Well, perhaps the old dear would have agreed that she loved the capital, just as she loved everything that was asked for her.

To begin with, at Dr Gendron's insistence, Monsieur Garousse had made the occasional critical comment on Madame Brulot's monthly accounts, and a few years previously Grandma Gendron had ever been temporarily removed to another boarding-house, simply to give Madame Brulot a rap over the knuckles. But the old girl had soon been brought back, as the financial outcome had been no improvement. Nevertheless the admonition implicit in the temporary removal of the doyenne of her boarders had created a certain resentment in Madame Brulot, and as she now realized that the old girl could not be put up anywhere else more cheaply than at the Villa des Roses, she never failed, whenever things were not going too well with the Poor Relief Committee, to ask Madame Gendron sarcastically 'if she wasn't by any chance thinking of running off again'.

At first glance Madame Gendron looked like a well-kept elderly lady, but on closer inspection she was clearly a very, very old woman. She was tall and carried herself frightfully straight, being quite simply too stiff to grow crooked at this point in her life. There was not much meat left on her, and her hands trembled so badly that sometimes, when she tried to put a piece of bread in her mouth, it wound up somewhere near one of her ears. She could still get downstairs by herself when the bell went for dinner, as long as she had a firm hold on the banisters. Monsieur Brulot would sometimes lend her a hand, though, and even take her into the banqueting room on his arm and show her to her place at the communal table. 'One must be gallant with the ladies,' he would say on these

occasions. It was particularly when she spoke that one had the impression of extreme old age. Her voice was not hoarse; she seemed rather to have rediscovered the intonation with which she must have recited her history lessons as a child. She spoke in a monotone, sometimes losing the thread, and used phrases from a bygone age. She walked cautiously, as though she did not really trust the ground under her feet, and she would certainly have upset or alarmed the other guests with her sudden appearances, if she had not announced her approach with a continuous faint cough, like plague victims once did with the bell they had to ring whenever they ventured into the street.

The tariff of eighteen francs included a daily wash, comb and general grooming for Madame Gendron. This was taken care of by the maids, who made a game of it and had reduced the washing to twice a week. There was an army of bedbugs in Madame Gendron's room, which strangely enough did not spread through the rest of the Villa. Every Saturday there was an assault on the vermin, but it was a hopeless battle, which none the less was not abandoned as the containment of the infestation was attributed to the weekly slaughter. However, this was a misconception for, when the old girl had been temporarily moved to another room, the whole swarm had moved with her.

After lunch Madame Gendron would get up from table a little before the others, even if it meant leaving her coffee untouched, so as to be able to pay a visit to all the other rooms on her floor. She removed something from each room, even if it was nothing more than a newspaper or an ashtray, and hid everything carefully in the empty suitcase which had stood for years like a waiting coffin in her room. Two or three times a week the contents would be emptied out by the maids and returned to their rightful owners.

It was always a painful moment for Madame Gendron. She would curse at the maids, calling them 'sluts', but the following day would start all over again, never losing heart. The other guests did not interfere with her and pretended to be taken in. And the old girl would smirk gleefully whenever some gentleman asked whether she had seen his clothes-brush, or some other object which had vanished without trace.

For that matter the poor old dear was very fond of gentlemen and was full of childish delight whenever one of them served her at table, to amuse the rest of the company. If one of them were walking upstairs ahead of her she would call after him, and if she found a newcomer upstairs alone for the first time she would call him 'darling' and try to grab hold of him.

She still liked making up, for there was an eau-de-Cologne bottle and a powder box on her washstand which she never forgot to use before leaving her room. However, since her sense of smell had deteriorated badly, the bottle was filled with water and the box with potato-flour on Madame Brulot's orders.

Occasionally Monsieur Brulot would declare his love for her in public, a joke which was invariably well received. But the old girl would have nothing to do with him, even though she was not generally very fussy, as she was afraid of the notary and did not trust him. She had seen him working on his court case a few times and had got the idea that he was preparing her will.

Twice each year, at Easter and on All Saints' Day, Madame Brulot was supposed to buy her a new dress, for which she received a hundred francs from Monsieur Garousse and was told to invoice him for a hundred and fifty. Madame Brulot, who could sew a little, would buy the material and make the dress herself as best she could. She always chose black, which doesn't show the dirt – lightweight material for summer and heavyweight for winter. The maids helped with the fitting,

which took place in the banqueting room, and cheered Madame Gendron up by telling her that once the new dress was ready the man of her dreams would soon appear, while Madame Brulot, with a mouth full of pins, fitted the material around her old limbs.

Monsieur Garousse had told Madame Brulot that 'without being extravagant Madame Gendron should be given the occasional outing'. Madame Brulot understood him perfectly. Every summer she took the old lady for two drives, and put in a bill for fifty-two trips, of which Monsieur Garousse paid for twelve. Not that they were very pleasant drives, since Madame Gendron would be casting angry glances at the coachman the whole time and complaining that other people were making free with her money.

At irregular intervals, usually every six or seven months or so, her son would come to Paris to attend a few affairs. While he was there he would do some shopping for his wife and take the opportunity of visiting his mother. He would ask Madame Brulot 'if everything was in order' and would give Mama two kisses, one when he arrived and one when he left. He would inquire in passing after the state of her health, and invariably thought she was looking well. Sometimes he would stay for a whole hour, but never missed his train home.

Madame Gendron was too old to take breakfast any more. She would stay in bed until it was time for lunch. At about half past one she would retire upstairs, make her daily tour of her floor and then return to her room, where she was left until the bell went for dinner, which began at seven and finished at about half past eight. Then she was helped into bed, where she stayed until the following lunchtime.

This was precisely why she had lived to such a great age, there being nothing better for the health than a regular routine.