

The Apparatus for the Chemical Analysis of the Last Breath

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Utile dulci.

PLACCUS

It is an undeniable fact that there is no end to our victories over Nature. Hosanna! We no longer even have time to think about them. What a triumph! And after all, why should we think about them? By what right? Besides, what does thinking mean? All that is just idle talk. Let us discover in a hurry! Let us invent! Let us forget! Let us rediscover! Let us start again and—keep moving! As fast as we can. Nothingness will recognize its own easily enough.

O Magic! At last the most delicate instruments of Science have become toys in the hands of children! Witness the delightful Apparatus invented by Professor Schneitzoëffer (Junior), of Nürnberg (Bavaria), for the Chemical Analysis of the Last Breath.

Price: one double thaler (7 fr. 95 with the box)—a gift! Branches in Paris, Rome, and all other capitals. Postage and packing extra. Refuse all imitations.

Thanks to this Apparatus, children will henceforth be able to mourn their parents without tears. For physical well-being must come first. Even if it should resemble the description which the moralist gives us of the inside of the convent in *Justine, or Virtue Rewarded*.

One cannot help wondering, indeed, whether the Golden Age has not returned.

An instrument of this sort naturally finds its place among the presents which can usefully be exchanged, between members of the family, on these two counts: the children's pleasure and the parents' peace of mind.

It can also be slipped into an Easter egg, hung on the Christmas tree, etc.

The illustrious inventor gives a discount to newspapers wishing to offer it as a free gift to their subscribers; it also commends itself to the organizers of charity raffles; national lotteries keep asking for it.

This jewel of an invention may be suitably placed. under a grandfather's table napkin at a celebration dinner, or presented at a wedding breakfast, or included among the wedding presents as a gift for the mother-in-law, or even simply handed over to the progeny of one's old friends from the country when one wants to give them what is known as a delightful surprise.

Let us imagine, in fact, a little town in the evening. The housewives have all finished their shopping and gone home. Dinner is over. The family has moved into the drawing-room. It is one of those evenings when there are no visitors and the parents are dozing by the fire. The lamp is burning low, and its light is softened even more by the shade. The tassels of the black silk bonnets hang down below the wings of the arm-chairs. The lotto, sometimes so tragic, has been interrupted; even the goose game has been relegated to the big drawer. The newspaper lies at the feet of the sleeping couple. The aged guest, a disciple (confidentially) of Voltaire, sunk in a soft easy chair, is peacefully digesting. Nothing can be heard but the even needle of the girl stitching her embroidery beside the table and thus marking the peaceful breathing of her progenitors, all

this accompanied by the ticking of the clock. In short, the respectable middle-class drawing-room breathes honestly acquired peace and quiet.

Pleasing pictures of the family, Progress, far from throwing you out, gives you new life, just as a skilful upholsterer renovates old furniture.

But let us not grow maudlin.

How are the children going to amuse themselves now, instead of making a din and waking their angry parents with their noisy old toys? Look! Here they come, walking on tiptoe, holding back the gay peals of their inextinguishable laughter. hush! They innocently hold Professor Schneitzoëffer's little apparatus to their elders' mouths.

That is their game! Poor little things! They are practicing! They are preparing for that moment—to which, alas, it should be so normal to grow accustomed at an early age—when they will do the same thing in earnest. They are thus wearing out, by a sort of moral gymnastics, the excess poignancy of the grief which they would feel at the loss of their nearest and dearest—if it were not for this artificial instrument. They are blunting in advance the final heartbreak.

The ingenious part of the process consists of collecting in this luxurious alembic a goodly number of *penultimate* breaths, during the sleep of Life, so as to be able, one day, by comparing the precipitates, to recognize in what respect the *first* breath of the sleep of Death differs from them. At bottom, therefore, this pastime is simply a preventive tonic which, here and now, rids the tender temperaments of our children of any predisposition to *excessively* painful emotions. It familiarizes them artificially with the anguish of the day of mourning, which, when it comes, will be hackneyed, commonplace, and insignificant.

How affectionately, on awakening, we kiss all these dear golden heads! With what sweet sadness we press these mischievous little creatures to our hearts!

Could we, without failing in our philosophical mandate, resist the duty of repeating this? Even if it went against the grain? It is a scientific gem, indispensable in any drawing-room; and the services it can render to society and Progress make it incumbent upon us from every point of view to advocate it enthusiastically.

It would be impossible to inculcate too much into young people, and even children, the taste for this hygienic pastime.

The Schneitzoëffer (Junior) apparatus—the only one whose use tones up the nerves of over-affectionate children—is destined to become, so to speak, the *vade mecum* of the schoolboy on holiday, who, dear disobedient creature, will study its application between that of a couple of pronominal or deponent verbs. His masters will set it for him as a holiday task. And when the new term starts, he will place the toy in his desk.

Happy century! What a comfort it will be for today's parents on their death-beds to think that these sweet creatures, on whom they have lavished all too much affection, will no longer waste time—time which is money!—on the futile flooding of the lachrymal glands and on those ridiculous gestures which unexpected deaths nearly always entail! How many troubles will be avoided by the daily use of this preventive!

Once the habit has been thoroughly contracted, the heirs—having acquired an enlightened, agreeable, melancholy, and altogether becoming indifference to the decease of their nearest and dearest; and having diluted beforehand the sadness of it—will no longer have any need to fear the consequences of the anguish and dismay into which the suddenness of the mournful preparations sometimes plunged their ancestors: they will be vaccinated against this despair. A new era is undoubtedly about to begin in this respect.

Funerals will take place without any agitation, and, so to speak, go like clockwork.

Let us never forget that our motto in all circumstances must be this: Calm! Calm! Calm!

Thus the neglect of the survivors' interests during the first few days; the confusion and dismay of the moment from which only the proverbial rapacity of those sinister mischief-makers, the grave-diggers, derives any profit; the wills drawn up hurriedly and, as they say, all anyhow—incomprehensible holographs on to which the lawyers swoop down like flocks of crows, to the great detriment of the inconsolable heirs; the last instructions dictated in a daze by the dying man; the chaotic state of the dead person's house; the petty thefts committed by the servants—all these misfortunes can be prevented by the daily use of the Schneitzoëffer (Junior) apparatus.

Corpses will be packed off as quickly as possible—and nobody in the house will even notice that you have disappeared. Everything will go on, without a pause, in the usual way.

The arts will be affected. Thanks to this apparatus, in ten years or so the picture of *Tintoretto's Daughter* will be remarkable only as an arrangement of colours, and the funeral marches of Beethoven and Chopin will cease to be understood as anything but dance music.

This is not to say that we are unaware of the prejudices against which Schneitzoëffer has to fight! But are we, or are we not, living in a practical, positive, enlightened age? We are. Very well, then let us be of our age! Man must keep up with the times. Who really wants to suffer nowadays? Nobody. Then let us have no more false modesty and mawkishness, no more sterile, prejudicial, and often exaggerated sentimentality, which no longer takes in even the passers-by, with their conventional raising of hats to hearses.

In Earth's name, let us have a little common sense and sincerity! However much we might put on airs, were we visible to the solar microscope a few years ago? No. So let us beware of condemning too quickly what shocks us, for want of familiarity and a little thought. Brave free-thinkers, let us bring into fashion the smiling dignity of filial grief, by pruning it in advance of its extravagant aspects, which sometimes border on the grotesque.

Let us go further: is not the pious prostration of, say, the child who has lost his aged mother a luxury—in our day—which the poor, harried by a compulsory task, cannot allow themselves? Is this morbid reverie absolutely essential, or can we do without it? Are the moans of well-to-do people anything but a waste of society's time compensated for by the toil of the working classes who, less favoured by Dame Fortune, stifle their own?

The man of means weeps over his dead only at the expense of those in need: he implicitly charges the social cost of the prerogative of tears to the very people who can shed their tears only furtively.

We all belong nowadays to the great Human Family: that is certain. In that case, why mourn one person more than another? . . . Let us conclude: since everything is forgotten sooner or later, is it not better to become accustomed to immediate oblivion? The most distracted grimaces, the most demented sobs and moans, the most desolate wails and jeremiads cannot, alas, bring anybody back to life.

And a good thing too, all considered! Otherwise should we not soon be squeezed together on this planet like a shoal of herrings? Proliferous as we are becoming, it would be absolutely unbearable. The ineluctable prophecy of the economists would rapidly be fulfilled; the worthy human Polyp would die of plethora, and, once the intermittent remedies of wars and epidemics had been recognized as inadequate, braining one another with knuckle-dusters would be indispensable if one persisted in wanting to breathe or move about on this globe—on this globe where Science proves to us, with mathematical certainty, that at bottom we are nothing but ephemeral vermin.

So much for those jokers, the solemn writers whom one has to read several times if one wants to penetrate the *real* meaning of what they are saying.

‘Absolutely painless! Hurry up, gentlemen! Buy now! 7 fr. 95 with the box! Look at it, ladies and gentlemen, look at it! The soul is at the bottom. It must be at the bottom! . . . The picture you see on the front, where my stick is pointing, shows the illustrious professor landing on the happy banks of the Seine and being welcomed by Monsieur Thiers, the Shah of Persia, and a crowd of enlightened persons. . . . The instrument is harmless. Absolutely harmless. Especially if you take the trouble to read the accompanying instructions—not with the haggard, absent-minded gaze with which you are honouring me in this sublime moment, but with mature attention. Since the reagents used in it—whether revulsive, toxic, or sternutatory—are the Inventor’s secret, the Patents Office has unfortunately forbidden us to divulge them. The notification reached us yesterday from the Cockades Office.

‘All the same, to reassure customers belonging to the Bourgeoisie, the class to which the professor is addressing himself most particularly, we can reveal that the mixture contained inside the multicoloured crystal ball which is the form the Apparatus takes has a basis of nitroglycerine, and everybody knows that nothing is more unctuous and inoffensive than glycerine. People use it every day for toilet purposes. (Shake well before using.) Hurry up! These orthopaedic jewels of the heart are the sensation of the century! They are selling by the gross. The Nurnberg factory is overworked!

‘The amazing Professor Schneitzoëffer (Junior) himself is hard pressed, unable to keep pace with the orders, in spite of the obstacles which the clergy keep on putting in his way.

‘A treasure for the nerves, a graduated sedative, a family panacea, this apparatus is indispensable for serious-minded parents who, having rejected the prejudices of the heart, consider that while feeling is pleasant enough at times, one must not have *too* much of it if one is a real Man. For Humanity, under the ancient light of the stars, is known today simply as the public, and Man as the individual. And we no longer call to witness a vague, old-fashioned firmament, but the Solar System, ladies and gentlemen—yes the Solar System, from Mercury to the inevitable Zeta Herculis.’¹

¹ It is officially recognized today that the whole solar system is imperceptibly moving towards the celestial position marked by the sixth star of the constellation of Hercules (known as Zeta Herculis). This igneous gulf—of such dimensions that the figures which define it would baffle the mind, if, for thinking people, the visible sky had any importance—seems, in astronomical terms, to be the necessary end, the inevitable conclusion of our collection of phenomena. It is no doubt to this climax that the Bavarian professor is referring. What we find reassuring is that we know this just as well as he, and that what is more, we have time to think about it.