



Translated by Lowell Bair Edited and with an Introduction by Leo Bersani

PART I

WE WERE IN STUDY HALL WHEN THE HEADMASTER walked in, followed by a new boy not wearing a school uniform, and by a janitor carrying a large desk. Those who were sleeping awoke, and we all stood up as though interrupting our work.

The headmaster motioned us to sit down, then turned to the teacher and said softly, "Monsieur Roger, I'm placing this pupil in your care. He'll begin in the eighth grade, but if his work and conduct are good enough, he'll be promoted to where he ought to be at his age."

The newcomer hung back in the corner behind the door, so that we could hardly see him. He was a country boy of about fifteen, taller than any of us. He wore his hair cut straight across the forehead, like a cantor in a village church, and he had a gentle, bewildered look. Although his shoulders were not broad, his green jacket with black buttons was apparently too tight under the arms, and the slits of its cuffs revealed red wrists accustomed to being bare. His legs, sheathed in blue stockings, protruded from his yellowish trousers, which were pulled up tight by a pair of suspenders. He wore heavy, unpolished, hobnailed shoes.

We began to recite our lessons. He concentrated all his attention on them, as though listening to a sermon, not daring even to cross his legs or lean on his elbow, and when the bell rang at two o'clock the teacher had to tell him to line up with the rest of us.

When we entered a classroom we always tossed our caps on the floor, to free our hands; as soon as we crossed the threshold we would throw them under the bench so hard that they struck the wall and raised a cloud of dust; this was "the way it should be done." But the new boy either failed to notice this maneuver or was too shy to perform it himself, for he was still holding his cap on his lap at the end of the prayer. It was a headgear of composite nature, combining elements of the busby, the lancer cap, the round hat, the otter-skin cap and the cotton night-cap—one of those wretched things whose mute ugliness has great depths of expression, like an idiot's face. Egg-shaped and stiffened by whalebone, it began with three rounded bands, followed by alternating diamond-shaped patches of velvet and rabbit fur separated by a red stripe, and finally there was a kind of bag terminating in a cardboard-lined polygon covered with complicated braid. A network of gold wire was attached to the top of this polygon by a long, extremely thin cord, forming a kind of tassel. The cap was new; its visor was shiny.

"Stand up," said the teacher.

He stood up; his cap fell. The whole class began to laugh.

He bent down and picked it up. A boy beside him knocked it down again with his elbow; he picked it up once again.

"Will you please put your helmet away?" said the teacher, a witty man.

A loud burst of laughter from the other pupils threw the poor boy into such a state of confusion that he did not know whether to hold his cap in his hand, leave it on the floor or put it on his head. He sat down again and put it back on his lap.

"Stand up," said the teacher, "and tell me your name."

The new boy mumbled something unintelligible.

"Say it again!"

The same mumbled syllables came from his lips again, drowned out by the jeers of the class.

"Louder!" cried the teacher. "Louder!"

With desperate determination the new boy opened his enormous mouth and, as though calling someone, shouted this word at the top of his lungs: "Charbovari!"

This instantly touched off an uproar which rose in a crescendo of shrill exclamations, shrieks, barks, stamping of feet and repeated shouts of "Charbovari! Charbovari!" Then it subsided into isolated notes, but it was a long time before it

died down completely; it kept coming back to life in fits and starts along a row of desks where a stifled laugh would occasionally explode like a half-spent firecracker.

A shower of penalties gradually restored order in the classroom, however, and the teacher, having managed to understand Charles Bovary's name after making him repeat it, spell it out and read it to him, immediately ordered the poor devil to sit on the dunce's seat at the foot of the rostrum. He began to walk over to it, then stopped short.

"What are you looking for?" asked the teacher.

"My ca—" the new boy said timidly, glancing around uneasily.

"The whole class will copy five hundred lines!" Like Neptune's "Quos ego" in the Aeneid, this furious exclamation checked the outbreak of a new storm. "Keep quiet!" continued the teacher indignantly, mopping his forehead with a handker-chief he had taken from his toque. "As for you," he said to the new boy, "you will write out 'Ridiculus sum' twenty times in all tenses." He added, in a gentler tone, "Don't worry, you'll find your cap: it hasn't been stolen."

Everything became calm again. Heads bent over notebooks, and for the next two hours the new boy's conduct was exemplary, despite the spitballs, shot from the nib of a pen, that occasionally splattered against his face. He merely wiped himself with his hand each time this happened, then continued to sit motionless, with his eyes lowered.

That evening, in study hall, he took sleeveguards from his desk, put his things in order and carefully ruled his paper. We saw him working conscientiously, looking up all the words in the dictionary and taking great pains with everything he did. It was no doubt because of this display of effort that he was not placed in a lower grade, for, while he had a passable knowledge of grammatical rules, his style was without elegance. He had begun to study Latin with his village priest, since his parents, to save money, had postponed sending him off to school as long as possible.

His father, Monsieur Charles-Denis-Bartholomé Bovary, had once been an assistant surgeon in the army. Forced to

Madame Bovary Gustave Flaubert

This exquisite novel tells the story of one of the most compelling heroines in modern literature— Emma Bovary. Unhappily married to a devoted, clumsy provincial doctor, Emma revolts against the ordinariness of her life by pursuing voluptuous dreams of ecstasy and love. But her sensuous and sentimental desires lead her only to suffering, corruption, and downfall. A brilliant psychological portrait, Madame Bovary searingly depicts the human mind in search of transcendence. Who is Madame Bovary? Flaubert's answer: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." Acclaimed as a masterpiece upon its publication in 1857, the work catapulted Flaubert to the ranks of the world's greatest novelists. This volume, with its fine translation by Lowell Bair and a complete supplement of essays and critical comments, is the indispensable Madame Bovary.

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