

## *A Shameful Human Infirmary*<sup>7</sup>

ALPHONSE DE LAMARTINE

My mother troubled herself but little about what is called instruction; she did not aspire to make me a "forward child for his age." She did not provoke me to that emulation which is but the jealousy of childish pride. She never had me compared to any one; she never exalted or humiliated me by such dangerous comparisons. She rightly thought that after my intellectual strength had been developed by time and health of body and mind, I would learn as easily as any other, that modicum of Greek, Latin, and figures, which constitutes that learned commonplace which is called an education. Her wish was to make me a happy child, a sound mind, a loving soul; a creature of God and not one of man's dolls...

My education was a secondhand philosophical education, a philosophical education corrected and softened down by motherly feelings. Physically, this education flowed in a great measure from Pythagoras and *Emile*. Consequently, the greatest simplicity in dress and the most rigorous frugality in food formed its basis. My mother was convinced, and on this head I have retained her firm belief, that to kill animals for the purpose of feeding on their flesh is one of the most deplorable and shameful infirmities of the human state; that it is one of those curses cast upon man either by his fall, or by the obduracy of his own perversity. She believed, and I am of the same belief, that these habits of hard-heartedness towards the gentlest animals, our companions, our auxiliaries, our brethren in toil and even in affection here below; that these immolations, these sanguinary appetites, this sight of palpitating flesh, are calculated to brutalize the instincts of the heart and make them ferocious. She believed, and I am of the same belief, that this nurture, which is seemingly much more succulent and much more energetic, contains in itself active causes of irritation and putridity, which sour the blood and shorten the days of mankind. In support of these ideas of abstinence, she quoted the innumerable gentle and pious tribes of India who deny themselves all that has had life; and the strong and healthy races of the shepherds and even of the laboring classes of our fields, who work harder than any, who live more innocently than any, and who do not eat meat ten times in the course of their lives. She never allowed me to eat any until I attained the age at which I was thrown into the helter-skelter life of colleges. To kill the desire for it, even if it had existed within me, she used no arguments, but appealed to instinct, which reasons much more powerfully in our breasts than logic.

I had a lamb which had been given to me by a peasant of Milly, and which I had taught to follow me all over like the most affectionate and faithful of dogs. We loved one another with that first fondness which little children and young animals naturally have for one another. One day the cook said to my mother before me:

"Madam, the lamb is fat, and the butcher has come for it; must I give it to him?"

I cried out upon it, threw myself before the lamb, and asked what the butcher wanted to do with it and what a butcher was. The cook answered that he was a man who killed lambs, sheep, little calves, and beautiful cows for money. I could hardly believe her. I prayed to my mother. I easily obtained that my little friend should be spared. A few days afterwards, my mother took me to town with her, and made me pass, as if by accident, through the yard of a slaughter house. I saw some men, their arms naked and besmeared with blood, knocking a bull in the head; others cutting the throats of calves and sheep, and separating their still heaving limbs. Streams of smoking gore ran along the pavement. An intense feeling of pity, mingled with horror, seized upon me. I asked to be led away quickly. The thought of these scenes, the necessary preliminaries of one of those dishes of meat which I had so often seen on the table, made me take a disgust to animal food and inspired me with a horror for butchers. Although

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<sup>7</sup> *Les confidences*. Translated by Eugene Plunkett (New York: Appleton & Co., 1865), pp. 59-61 [note 8].

the necessity of complying with the rules of the society in which we live has made me eat, since then, all that other people eat, I have retained a repugnance, based on reason, to cooked flesh, and it has always been difficult for me not to see in the butcher's trade something of the executioner's occupation.

Until the age of twelve, then, I only lived on bread, milk-food, vegetables, and fruit. My health was not less robust on this account, nor my growth less rapid, and it was to this diet, perhaps, that I was indebted for that purity of feature, that exquisite sensibility of feeling, and that quiet gentleness of humor and character which I had preserved up to that period.