

Contents

With the Flow	
<i>Introduction</i>	III
WITH THE FLOW	I
Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	19
Chapter 3	35
Chapter 4	63
M. BOUGRAN'S RETIREMENT	71
Chapter 1	73
Chapter 2	83
Chapter 3	89
Chapter 4	97
<i>Note on the Texts</i>	103
<i>Notes</i>	103

With the Flow

WITH THE FLOW

Chapter I

THE WAITER PLACED HIS LEFT HAND on his hip, set his right hand on the back of a chair and swayed on one foot, pursing his lips.

“Well now, it’s all a matter of taste,” he said. “If I were in Monsieur’s place, I’d ask for Roquefort.”

“Very well, bring me some Roquefort.”

And M. Jean Folantin, sitting at a table strewn with plates on which leftovers were growing cold and empty bottles whose round bases imprinted a blue mark like an official stamp on the tablecloth, pulled a face, in no doubt that he was about to eat a dismal piece of cheese; his expectations were fully realized: the waiter brought a kind of white lace with indigo marbling, obviously cut out of a cake of Marseilles soap.

M. Folantin picked at his cheese, folded his napkin, stood up and left; the waiter bowed to his back and shut the door behind him.

Once he was outside, M. Folantin opened his umbrella and started walking. The biting cold, cutting into ears and nose like a razor blade, had been succeeded by the fine strop of a pouring rain. The harsh, glacial winter which had held Paris in its grip for three days was relenting, and the slushy snow was melting and splashing beneath the swollen, rain-sodden clouds.

M. Folantin was cantering along by now, dreaming of the fire that he had lit at home before going off to eat his fill in his restaurant.

Truth to tell, he was not altogether free of anxiety: quite unusually, that evening, he had been too lazy to rebuild from the bottom up the fire prepared by his concierge. A coke fire is so difficult to get going, he reflected – and he dashed upstairs, four at a time, to find that in his fireplace there was not a single flicker of flame.

“To think there aren’t any cleaners or caretakers who can lay a decent fire,” he grumbled, and placed his candle on the carpet. Then, without taking off his outdoor clothes, his hat still on his head, he pushed aside the grating and refilled it methodically, leaving room between the lumps of coke for the air to get through. He lowered the shutter, worked his way through several matches and a quantity of paper, and then took off his clothes.

Suddenly he heaved a sigh, as his lamp had started emitting deep burping noises.

“Oh, wonderful! No oil! That just about crowns it all!” He lifted the lantern lid and gazed with a woebegone expression at the wick that he had pulled up to the charred crown, jagged with black teeth. It had been exposed to the air and had gone all yellow.

“This life is intolerable,” he said to himself as he looked around for some scissors. He repaired his light as best he could, then flopped down in an armchair and lost himself in his reflections.

It had been a bad day. Ever since the morning he had been in a foul mood. The chief clerk of the office where he had

worked for twenty years had told him off, quite ungraciously, for arriving later than usual.

M. Folantin had bristled and, taking out his round pocket watch, had replied sharply, "Eleven o'clock precisely."

His chief had in turn pulled out from his pocket a powerful timepiece.

"Eleven twenty," he had retorted. "I'm as regular as the Bourse." And with a contemptuous glance he had deigned to excuse his employee, expressing pity for the antique piece of clockwork he carried round.

M. Folantin took this ironic way of exonerating him as an allusion to his poverty, and he answered back in no uncertain terms to his superior – who, no longer prepared to accept the senile inaccuracies of a watch, drew himself to his full length and, in threatening and majestic terms, again reproached M. Folantin for his lack of punctuality.

His working day, having got off to a bad start, had continued to be quite unbearable. In the wan, dingy light that lent a dirty-grey hue to his paper, he had had to copy interminable letters, draw up voluminous tables of figures and at the same time listen to the chattering of a colleague, a little old man who, with his hands in his pockets, liked the sound of his own voice.

On he went, reciting the day's newspaper in its entirety, and even adding his own pennyworth of wisdom, or else criticizing the way the writers had expressed themselves and suggesting other turns of phrase that he would like to have seen instead of those he loftily dismissed, and he interlarded these observations with details of his poor state of health

– which, he said, was nonetheless just a fraction better than it had been, thanks to his constant use of violet-leaf ointment* and repeated ablutions in cold water.

Listening to these fascinating remarks, M. Folantin ended up getting in a muddle: the lines he was drawing on his sheets started to sag, and the columns of figures began to stampede; he had been obliged to scratch out whole pages and overload each line with corrections – but it had all been a complete waste of time, as the chief had returned his work to him, with orders to do it all over again.

The day had finally come to an end and, under a louring sky, M. Folantin had had to trudge his way through the gusts of wind, splashing along in fondants of mud and sorbets of snow, towards his lodgings and his restaurant – and lo and behold, to add insult to injury, the dinner was awful and the wine tasted like ink.

His feet frozen, squeezed into ankle boots that had started to warp in the deluge and the puddles, his cranium white-hot under the gas burner hissing over his head, M. Folantin had hardly touched his food, and even now his bad luck refused to let go of him: his fire faltered; his lamp grew sooty; his tobacco was damp and kept going out, staining the cigarette paper with a stream of yellow juice.

He was overcome by an immense sense of discouragement. The emptiness of his prison-like existence became evident, and, as he poked at the fire, M. Folantin, leaning forward in his armchair, his forehead resting on the ledge of the fireplace, started to look back over the *Via Dolorosa** of his forty years, halting in despair as he came to each station of the Cross.

He had not exactly been brought up in the lap of luxury: from father to son, the Folantins had been penniless. The family annals did, it was true, include a certain Gaspard Folantin, who, back in the mists of time, had made nearly a million in the leather trade, but the chronicle added that after squandering his fortune he had been left insolvent. The memory of this man was still vivid among his descendants, who cursed him, citing him to their sons as an example not to be followed and continually warning them that they would die in poverty just like him if they hung out in cafés or ran after women.

Anyway, Jean Folantin had been born in impoverished conditions. The day his mother's labour finally came to an end, his father's sole possessions amounted to a string of ten little silver coins. An aunt who, albeit no midwife, was expert in this kind of task delivered the child, wiped him clean with butter and, so as to avoid the expense of lycopodium,* powdered his thighs with flour she had scraped off the crust of a loaf of bread. "You see, my lad, you had a humble birth," Aunt Eudore used to say, after putting him right about these small details – and Jean was already resigned to the absence of any well-being in his future life.

His father passed away very young, and the stationery shop he had been running on the Rue du Four was sold to pay off the debts incurred during his illness. Mother and child found themselves out on the streets. Madame Folantin found lodgings elsewhere and became a shop assistant, then a cashier in a linen drapery, while her son became a boarder in a *lycée*. Although Madame Folantin was in quite desperate straits, she obtained a stipend and went short of

everything, saving what she could from her meagre monthly earnings, so that she would later be able to pay the fees for exams and diplomas.

Jean realized what sacrifices his mother was imposing on herself, and he worked as hard as he could, winning all the prizes and compensating in the eyes of his bursar for the disdain that his situation as a poverty-stricken young lad inspired, since he was successful in all the competitive exams. He was a highly intelligent boy and, despite his youth, already of a sedate disposition. Seeing the wretched existence his mother led, shut away from morning to night in a glass cage, holding her hand to her mouth as she coughed, bent over her books, always timid and meek in the midst of the insolent hubbub of a shop full of customers, he realized that he would not be able to count on any mercy from fate or any justice from destiny.

So he had the common sense not to listen to the suggestions of his teachers, who kept pushing him on in the hope of getting a feather in their own caps and gaining promotion, and, by slaving away uninterruptedly, he passed his baccalaureate early, at the end of the fifth form.

He needed to find without delay a job that would relieve the heavy burden his mother had to bear. It was a long time before he found one, for his frail appearance did not plead in his favour, and he limped on his left leg as a result of an accident he had suffered as a boy at primary school. Anyway, his run of bad luck seemed to come to an end: Jean applied for a ministerial job and was accepted, with a salary of fifteen hundred francs.

When her son announced this good news to her, Mme Folantin smiled gently. "Now you're your own boss," she said. "You don't need anyone else any more. My poor boy, it was high time" – and her health, already fragile, deteriorated from day to day: one month later, she died of the consequences of a heavy cold caught in the draughty cage where she sat, winter and summer.

Jean was left on his own. Aunt Eudore had been dead and buried for a long time; his other relations were either scattered far and wide or else deceased; in any case, he had never known them: at the most he could remember the name of a cousin who was at present living in the provinces, in a convent.

He made a few acquaintances, and even some friends, then the moment came when they either left Paris or got married. He couldn't be bothered to form new friendships, and, little by little, he gave up trying and lived alone.

"One way or another, loneliness is a pain," he reflected now, placing lumps of coke one by one in his grate, and thinking back to his former comrades. How marriage came between friends! They'd been really close; they'd lived the same kind of life; they'd been quite unable to get by without each other; and now they scarcely said hello when they happened to meet. The married friend is always somewhat embarrassed, as he's the one who has broken off relations, and then he tends to imagine that you look down on the life he's leading – and when it comes down to it, he is convinced in all good faith that he occupies a more honourable status in life than a bachelor. So M. Folantin told himself as he

recalled the embarrassment and the hint of stand-offishness he had encountered in old friends he bumped into after they had got married. It was all so very silly! And he smiled as the memory of the companions of his youth inevitably took him back to the time he had shared their company.

He had been twenty-two at the time, and found enjoyment in everything. The theatre struck him as a place of delight, the cafés as a realm of enchantment, and Bullier's,* where the girls stretched out their lithe bodies to the clash of the cymbals and kicked their heels in the air, inflamed him, for in his overheated mind he imagined them naked and could see, beneath their knickers and skirts, the moist, taut flesh. A dense odour of woman rose amid the swirling dust, and he was entranced as he stood watching the fellows in trilbies cavalcading along as they patted their thighs. But he had a limp, he was shy, and he didn't have any money. Never mind: his torment was sweet to him, and just like many other poor devils, he was happy with very little. A couple of words uttered in passing, a backward over-the-shoulder smile, filled him with joy, and when he was back home he would dream of these women and imagine that the ones who had looked or smiled at him were better than the rest.

Oh, if only his salary had been higher! Short of cash as he was, without a hope of picking up girls at a dance, he had recourse to the women who lurked in alleys, the wretched ones whose fat bellies drooped along the edge of the pavement. He would plunge along the passages after them, trying to make out their faces lost in the shadows – and the garish lighting, the horrors of age, the ignominy

of their clothes and make-up and the abject little bedrooms did not put him off. Just as in the greasy-spoon cafés where his healthy appetite made him devour the cheapest cuts of meat, the hungers of his flesh were such that he was all too happy to pick up the leftovers of love. Indeed, there were evenings when, penniless and without any hope of finding satisfaction, he would hang around in the Rue de Buci, the Rue de l'Égout, the Rue du Dragon, the Rue Neuve-Guillemin, the Rue Beurrière, just to rub shoulders with this woman or that. He was happy to be invited over, and when he was acquainted with one of these women touting for trade, he would chat with her, passing the time of day, then withdraw with a "goodnight", discreetly, so as not to frighten off the punters, and he longed for the end of the month, promising himself that as soon as he'd been paid, he'd have a rare old time.

Happy days! To think that now he was a bit better off, now he could graze in richer pastures and take his fill of exercise between cleaner sheets, he no longer felt tempted by anything! The money had come along too late, at a time when no pleasure could allure him.

But between being first overwhelmed by the tumult of his blood and later feeling stricken with apathy, so that he merely sat impotently in an armchair by his fireside, there had been an intervening period. Around the age of twenty-seven, he had found himself filled with disgust for the registered prostitutes to be found here and there in his part of town; he had felt like a bit of flirtatious banter, the occasional caress; he had dreamt of not having to get down

to business on the sofa without a moment's hesitation, but of deferring his pleasure and sitting down at his ease. As his resources wouldn't stretch to keeping a girlfriend – for he was puny and lacked any of the social graces, any talent for light-hearted amorous chit-chat, or any gift of the gab – he had been able at leisure to reflect on the benevolence of a Providence which gives money, honour, wealth, women – indeed everything – to some men and nothing to the rest. He had been forced to content himself again with cheap and cheerful meals out, but as he was able to pay more, he was directed to the cleaner dining rooms with whiter tablecloths.

On one occasion he had imagined he'd struck lucky: he made the acquaintance of a young working girl. She condescended to give him more than just a hint of her affections, but, overnight, without so much as a by-your-leave, she dropped him, leaving him with a painful souvenir which, he found, simply refused to go away. He shuddered when he recalled that period of suffering when he still had to turn up at his office, despite it being uncomfortable to walk. It is true he was still young and innocent, and that instead of turning to the first doctor he could find he resorted to quacks, paying no heed to the inscriptions scrawled all over their adverts in the public toilets. Some of the comments were perfectly truthful: "This will clean your blood" – "Yes, and it will clean out your wallet, too." Others were darkly menacing: "Your hair will fall out." Yet others were philosophical and resigned: "You're better off sleeping with your wife." And everywhere the adjective "free", prefixed to the

word "treatment", had been crossed out, effaced, scratched out with a knife-blade by men who, it was easy to guess, had performed this task with conviction and rage.

But now the time for love was over, and his yearnings were suppressed; the panting and the frenzy had been succeeded by a settled and tranquil chastity – but also, it had to be said, what an appalling void had opened up in his existence now that his senses no longer raised their heads!

"This really is no joke," reflected M. Folantin, shaking his head and poking the fire. "It's freezing in here," he murmured. "It's unfortunate that wood costs so much, otherwise what a fine blaze I could make!" And this idea led him to think of the wood they handed out left, right and centre in the ministry, and then he reflected on the civil service itself, and finally his office.

There, too, his illusions hadn't lasted long. At first he had imagined that good behaviour and hard work would lead to promotion, but he soon realized that patronage is everything. Employees born in the provinces were supported by their members of parliament and managed to get the best jobs. He had been born in Paris: there was no important personage to give him a helping hand, so he stayed at the level of a mere copying clerk, and year after year he copied and recopied piles of dispatches, drew up innumerable columns of figures, amassed tons of records, repeated thousands of times over the invariable salutations dictated by protocol. His initial zeal started to cool, and now, no longer expecting any rise or hoping for any promotion, he was slack and careless in his work.

With his 237 francs and 40 centimes per month, he had never been able to move into comfortable accommodation or take a maid, or treat himself and put his feet up, all snug and warm in slippers. One day, fed up with it all, he made an attempt to change things, flying in the face of common sense and all that is plausible. The failure of the experiment proved decisive, and at the end of six months he had been forced to wend his way, yet again, from restaurant to restaurant, feeling he could at least be satisfied that he had got rid of his housekeeper, Mme Chabanel, an old hag, six feet tall, with moustachioed lips and lewd eyes set into her face over her sagging jowls. She was a sort of camp-follower who ate like a horse and drank like a fish. She was a lousy cook, and over-familiar to an impossible degree. She would plonk the plates onto the table at random, then sit down opposite her master, hoist up her skirts and chatter away, laughing and joking, her bonnet askew and her hands on her hips.

It was pointless to expect her to serve him properly – but M. Folantin would perhaps have put up with even this humiliating lack of ceremony if the amazing old girl hadn't stripped him of his possessions like a highway robber: flannel waistcoats and socks would vanish, old shoes would go missing, spirits would evaporate into thin air, and even the matches seemed to go up in smoke by themselves.

At the end of the day, this state of affairs could not be allowed to continue, and so M. Folantin screwed up his courage and, fearful that this woman would otherwise pillage him completely during his absence, took drastic action and, one evening, sacked her there and then.

Mme Chabanel turned scarlet, and her mouth fell open, revealing a toothless chasm, then she started to wave her arms about like a flustered hen. Whereupon M. Folantin amiably said, "Since I won't be eating at home any more, I'd rather you used up the food that's left than let it go to waste – so, if you don't mind, we can take a look together and see what I've got."

And he opened the cupboards.

"This is a bag of coffee, and this bottle contains brandy – am I right?"

"Yes, Monsieur, it does indeed," Mme Chabanel groaned.

"Well, that's good enough to keep, and I'll hold on to it," said M. Folantin. He said the same about everything else. Old Mother Chabanel ended up taking away nothing more than two pennyworth of vinegar, a handful of grey salt and a little glass of lamp oil.

"Phew!" M. Folantin exclaimed as the woman trudged downstairs, stumbling on every step. But his joy had soon died away: ever since then, domestic affairs had gone all awry. Widow Chabanel had been replaced by the concierge, a man who pummelled the bedclothes into shape with his fists and made pets of the spiders, whose webs he carefully tended.

Ever since then, M. Folantin's victuals had been both dubious and insipid; he had been forced to do the rounds of the local eateries day after day, and his stomach had rusted up. Now the time had come for Saint-Galmier water and seltzer water,* and mustard to disguise the gamy taste of the meat and spice up the gravy, which tasted like dishwater.

As he ran through the whole sequence of these memories, M. Folantin fell into a terrible fit of depression. For years he had valiantly put up with solitude, but on this particular evening he admitted he was beaten. He regretted the fact that he had never married, and he turned against himself the arguments he had trotted out when he went around preaching celibacy for poor people.

“So what if children did come along?” he reflected. “People brought them up – they just tightened their belts a bit. Damn it, I’d do what everyone else does! I’d buckle down to it and take on extra copying in the evenings, so that my wife could afford some decent clothes. We’d eat meat only at lunchtime, and like most modest households we’d be happy with a bowl of soup for our evening meal. What do all the privations matter in comparison with a well-regulated existence – with the evenings spent in the company of your wife and child, with food (not plenty of it, but wholesome enough), with clothes mended and the linen laundered and brought back at regular times!... Ah, a decent laundry service... music to a bachelor’s ears!... Right now, the laundry people only bring my clothes when they have the time, and they return my shirts all crumpled and off-white, my handkerchiefs in tatters and my socks as full of holes as a sieve – and they laugh in my face when I complain!... And then, how will it all end? In the hospice or the asylum in the case of a lingering illness – here at home, relying on the pity of a sick-nurse, if death comes more quickly.

“Too late... my virility has gone; marriage is out of the question. There’s no doubt about it: I’m a failure. Ah

CHAPTER I

well, the best I can do,” sighed M. Folantin, “is to turn in and go to sleep.” And as he pulled back his blankets and arranged his pillows, a prayer of thanksgiving rose from his soul, in celebration of the tranquillizing power of his ever-welcoming bed.

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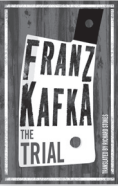
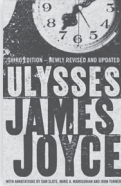
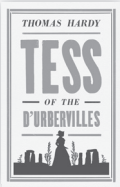
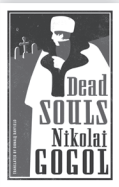
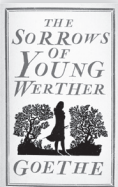
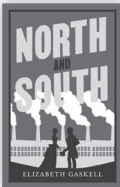
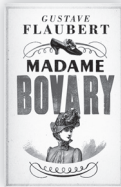
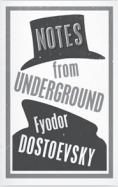
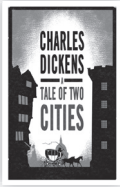
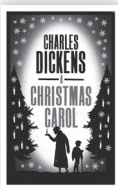


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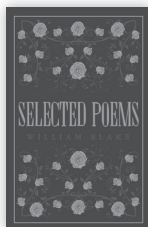
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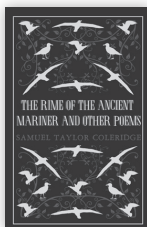
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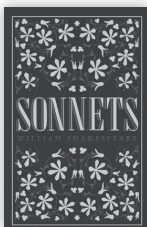
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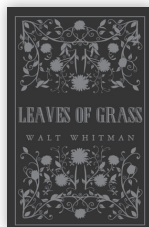
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