

Marcel Aymé

Grace

by **Marcel Aymé**

Translated by **Karen Reshkin**

In 1939, the best Christian in Rue Gabrielle, and indeed in all Montmartre, was a certain M. Duperrier. He was such a devout man, so just and so charitable, that God, without waiting for him to die, and while he was in the prime of life, graced his head with a halo that never left him day or night. It was made of an ethereal substance just like the halos in Paradise; it appeared as a whitish disc that looked like it had been cut from some rather stiff cardboard, and it emitted a soft glow. M. Duperrier wore it with gratitude and he continually thanked Heaven for having bestowed such a distinction upon him— one which, in his modesty, he wouldn't have dreamed of construing as a binding promise for the hereafter. He would certainly have been the happiest of men except that his wife, instead of rejoicing in such an unusual blessing, was spiteful and irritated.

“What will people think?” she said. “What will everyone take us for, I ask you—the neighbors and the shopkeepers, even my cousin Leopold? I hope you're proud of yourself. It's simply ridiculous. You'll see, we haven't heard the last of this.”

Mme. Duperrier was a fine woman, highly devout and full of moral decency, but the vanity of earthly things was not yet apparent to her. Like so many people whose good intentions get derailed by the little things in life, she believed that it was more important to be esteemed by her landlady than by her creator. Within a week, her fear of being questioned about the halo by some neighbor or one

of the shopkeepers began to sour her character. Over and over, she tried to tear off the circle of white light that shone around her husband's head, but with no more success than if she'd tried to seize a sunbeam in her fingers; she couldn't budge that disc by so much as a hair's breadth. The halo encircled the top of her husband's forehead right at the hairline and came well down the nape of his neck, dipping slightly over his right ear, which gave it a rakish air.

This foretaste of divine ecstasy didn't make Duperrier forget his duty to look after his wife's peace of mind. He himself was too discreet and modest not to take these fears seriously. God's gifts, especially when they seem a bit gratuitous, often fail to receive the respect they deserve, and people tend to see a scandal all too easily. Duperrier endeavored as much as possible to try not to arouse attention wherever he went. He regretfully abandoned the derby hat which he believed was indispensable attire for him as an accountant and took to wearing a large, light-colored felt hat whose broad brim exactly covered the halo; this meant that he had to wear his hat tilted back in an off-handed-looking way. Dressed this way, his appearance presented nothing altogether unusual to people on the street. True, the brim of his hat had a certain phosphorescence, but in daylight it looked as if it were just the lustrous sheen of the felt. At work, Duperrier managed to escape the attention of both the staff and the manager. In the little shoe factory in Menilmontant where he worked as an accountant, his office was a small, glassed-in room between two workshops, and his isolation spared him from any prying questions. He resolved to keep his hat on at all times, and no one was curious enough to ask him why.

All these precautions still didn't allay his wife's anxiety. It seemed to her that Duperrier's halo was already a

topic of gossip among the neighbors. Her distressing apprehension meant she could now only go out in Rue Gabrielle with utmost caution, fear gripping her heart and wrenching her gut. She constantly thought she heard laughter bursting forth behind her as she passed by. This good woman had never wanted anything more than to fit in with a social class that worships the happy medium; such a flagrant anomaly as the one afflicting Duperrier was rapidly taking on the proportions of a catastrophe. Its absurdity was what really made it so monstrous in her eyes. Nothing would convince her to accompany her husband outdoors. Evenings and Sunday afternoons, which they used to spend out walking or with their friends, they now spent alone together, in an intimacy that became more strained every day. They spent the long hours of free time between meals in the oak-paneled dining room. Mme. Duperrier, unable to knit a single stitch, sat nursing her bitterness at the sight of this halo. Duperrier generally kept himself occupied with inspirational reading, and sometimes felt as though he were touched by the wings of angels. The blissful expression on his face added to her irritation. Sometimes, though, he gave her a look full of concern, which she would return with such hateful reprobation in her eyes that it would stir in him a twinge of remorse—one which was wholly incompatible with his gratitude to heaven, and which in turn caused him a sort of remorse feedback.

Such a painful situation couldn't go on forever without compromising the poor woman's sanity. She soon complained that she was unable to sleep at night because of the halo's glow spreading over the pillows. Duperrier, who sometimes read a chapter of the gospels by this divine light, couldn't deny the validity of these grievances, and began to feel a rather keen sense of his own guilt. In the end,

certain events, which were most regrettable for the consequences they entailed, brought this state of unease to the point of acute crisis.

One morning on his way to the office, Duperrier met a funeral in the rue Gabrielle, just a few steps from home. Ever since he'd gotten his halo, he would (fiercely suppressing his courteous nature) just acknowledge people by lifting a finger to the brim of his hat, but when the deceased passed by, on due consideration, he decided he mustn't shirk his duty to remove his hat. All along the street, shopkeepers stood gaping in their doorways, rubbing their eyes at the sight of his halo, and gathering to talk about just what this was. As she went out to do her shopping, Mme. Duperrier was accosted by the group, and got extremely flustered, launching into denials whose vehemence seemed very odd. When her husband came home at noon, he found her in a state of agitation that made him anxious for her sanity.

"Get that halo out of my sight!" she cried. "Take it off this instant! I can't stand the sight of it anymore!"

Duperrier protested that it was not within his power to get rid of it, to which his enraged wife replied, "If you had even the slightest respect or sympathy for me, you'd surely find a way to remove it, but all you think about is yourself."

Her words, which he wisely let pass, nonetheless gave him pause for thought. The very next day, a fresh incident made their meaning abundantly clear. Duperrier never missed early Mass, and ever since he had come into good graces, he would go to hear Mass at the Sacré-Coeur Basilica. There he had no choice but to remove his hat, but the church was fairly large, and at that early hour, the flock

of the faithful was sparse enough so that it was fairly easy to stay out of sight behind a pillar. He must have been less careful that morning. After the service was over, as he was nearing the exit, an old woman threw herself at his feet, crying, "Saint Joseph! Saint Joseph!" and kissing the hem of his overcoat. Duperrier slipped away, flattered, but also vexed when he recognized his worshipper as an old lady who lived just down the street from him. A few hours later, the devout creature burst into Mme Duperrier's apartment, crying, "Saint Joseph! I must see Saint Joseph!"

Saint Joseph, although lacking in sparkle and less than picturesque, is an excellent saint, but his rather plain virtues, with their whiff of woodworking and passive goodness, seem to have done him a disservice. As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot of people, even some very devout ones, who without even realizing it, tend to perceive his role in the Nativity as that of a naïve and forgiving husband. This image of a good-natured simpleton is further aggravated by people's habit of superimposing on the saint the image of that other Joseph who sidestepped the advances of Putiphar's wife. Mme. Duperrier did not have much respect for her husband's supposed saintliness, but this fervent worshipper, invoking him at the top of her lungs under the name of Saint Joseph, seemed to seal her shame and ridicule. In a half-demented rage, she chased the old lady out with an umbrella, and then broke several piles of dishes. The first thing she did when her husband got home was to throw a hysterical fit, and when she came to herself, she said in a hard-edged voice:

"For the last time, I'm asking you to get rid of that halo. You can do it. And you know very well that you can do it."

He hung his head, not daring to ask how she thought he ought to proceed, but she added, "It's simple. You just have to commit a sin."

Duperrier didn't speak a word in protest; he retired to the bedroom to pray. "Lord," he said, "you have accorded me the highest honor that a man can hope for on this earth, save martyrdom. Thank you Lord, but I am a married man, and I share everything with my wife, from the bread of the trials you see fit to send me to the honey of your blessings. Only in this way can a devout couple hope to follow the path of righteousness that you have laid forth. My wife, as it happens, cannot bear the sight or even the thought of my halo, certainly not because it's a gift from heaven, but simply because it's a halo. You know how women are. If an unusual event doesn't move them on a visceral level, it upsets the orderly little ideas they've set up in their little heads. There's no helping it. My poor wife could live a hundred years more and there would never ever be the slightest place in her universe for my halo. Lord, you who know my heart, you know how little I care about my quiet life and my slippers in the evening. For the joy of wearing the sign of your benevolence, I would serenely endure the most violent domestic quarrels. Unfortunately, this is not about my tranquility. My wife is losing her zest for living. Far worse, I can see the day coming when her hatred of my halo will lead her to curse the name of the One who gave it to me. Shall I do nothing for her? Must I let the companion You have chosen for me die and damn herself? Today I find myself at the crossroads, and the most righteous path does not seem to be the most merciful. Therefore, let the spirit of your infinite justice speak through my conscience. In this hour of perplexity, this is my humble prayer which I lay at your feet, O my Lord."

No sooner had he finished than his conscience came down in favor of the path of sin, making it his duty of Christian charity. He returned to the dining room where his wife was waiting, grinding her teeth.

"God is just," he said, sticking his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest. "He knew what he was doing when he gave me this halo. Actually, I deserve it more than any man on earth. They don't make people like me anymore. When I think of the baseness of the human flock, and then I consider all the perfections united in me, it makes me want to spit in people's faces as they pass by. God has repaid me, of course, but if the Church had any sense of justice, don't you think I should at least be archbishop?"

Duperrier had chosen the sin of pride, which allowed him, at the same time he was exalting his own merit, to praise God who had honored him. His wife soon figured out that he was sinning deliberately, and immediately joined in the game.

"Oh my dear, how proud I am of you," she said. "Even with his car and his villa at Vésinet, my cousin Leopold can't hold a candle to you."

"That's just what I think. I could have made my fortune as well as anyone, and better than Leopold, if I had taken the trouble. But I chose another path, and my success is of a different order than your cousin's. I scorn his money, like I scorn him, like I scorn the countless imbeciles who will never comprehend the grandeur of my modest existence. *For they have eyes and they see not.*"

Although he spoke these words half-heartedly, torn by regret, within a few days they became an easy exercise, a habit which no longer cost Duperrier effort. And such is

the power of words over the mind that he came to take his own words at face value. His pride, which was no longer feigned in the least, made him unbearable to people he met. His wife, however, kept an anxious watch on the halo's brightness. She saw that it wasn't growing weaker, and it seemed to her that her husband's sin was lacking in weight and consistency. Duperrier readily acknowledged this.

"I couldn't agree with you more," he said. "Here I thought I was being prideful, and all along I was only expressing the simplest, most obvious truth. When one attains the pinnacle of perfection as I have done, why, the word pride no longer has any meaning."

He did not praise his own virtues any less, but he recognized the need to try another sin. It seemed to him that on the scale of the mortal sins, gluttony would be the most fitting to serve his plan, which was to get rid of his halo without doing too much to shake Heaven's confidence in him. This benign view of gluttony occurred to him as he remembered the mild reprimands he'd earned in childhood for eating too much jam or chocolate. Full of hope, his wife began to prepare fancy dishes for him, as delicious as they were varied. On the Duperriers' table, it was all fattened pullets, *pâtés en croûte*, trout with bleu cheese, lobsters, desserts, sweets, elaborate layer cakes, and fine wines, too. Meals lasted twice as long as before, sometimes three times longer or even more. It was quite a horrible, disgusting sight to see Duperrier, his napkin tied under his chin, his face reddening, his eyes heavy with satisfaction, chewing food, washing down sirloin and mortadella with a big swallow of claret, swallowing, dribbling cream sauce and belching in his halo. He soon acquired a taste for fine cuisine and abundant meals. He often scolded his wife for an overdone leg of lamb or an ill-chosen mayonnaise. One

night, she got fed up with his grumbling and observed in a sharp voice:

"Your halo is hanging on very well. You'd think it was growing fat on my cooking, too! It looks to me as though gluttony is not a sin. The only downside is that it's expensive, but I see no reason why I shouldn't put you back on vegetable broth and noodles."

"You can start by leaving me alone!" roared Duperrier. "Put me back on vegetable broth and noodles? I'd like to see that! So you think you know what I ought to do better than I do? Put me back on noodles! What a lot of nerve! You roll all over in sin to do something nice for a woman, and this is all the thanks you get. Be quiet! I don't know what keeps me from giving you a couple slaps."

One sin leads to another, and gluttony denied provokes wrath; pride likewise inclines one to anger. Duperrier let himself go with this new sin, not really knowing whether it was for his wife's benefit or whether he was just giving in to his penchant. This man who had always been known for his gentleness and affability, now yelled his head off, though nothing of smashing the china, and didn't hesitate to beat his wife now and then. He even took the Lord's name in vain. These increasingly frequent fits of anger did not make him any less prideful or gluttonous. He was now sinning on three fronts, and Mme. Duperrier was making some fairly gloomy remarks about God's infinite indulgence.

The noblest virtues may continue to flourish in a soul already tainted by the practice of sin. Although prideful, gluttonous, and wrathful, Duperrier was still steeped in Christian charity and maintained a high regard for his duties as a man and a husband. When he saw that heaven

showed no reaction to his fits of anger, he resolved to be envious. Truth be told, although he hadn't noticed it, envy had already stolen into his heart. Eating well tires the liver, and pride exasperates one's sense of injustice, and both of these dispose even the best of men to envy his fellow man. And anger lent a hateful voice to Duperrier's envy. He began to be jealous of his family, his friends, his boss, the neighborhood merchants, and even sports stars and movie stars whose pictures appeared in the newspapers. Everything offended him. Sometimes he would tremble with petty rage when he thought of how his neighbor had a sterling silver carving set, while his was merely horn-handled. Nonetheless, his halo remained resplendent. Instead of being astonished by this, he concluded that his sins had no reality, and he had no lack of explanations: that his so-called gluttony did not exceed the healthy requirements of his appetite; likewise his anger and his envy revealed a mind thirsting for justice. But his halo remained his strongest argument.

"Somehow I imagined that heaven would be a bit more touchy," his wife would say sometimes. "If your piggery, your boasting, your brutality, and your baseness of heart don't tarnish your halo, I guess I don't have to worry about my place in heaven.

"Shut up!" he retorted wrathfully. "Are you through riding me, woman? I'm fed up to here! To think that a saintly man like me has to make his way down the path of sin, and all for Madame's peace of mind! What the hell are you complaining about? Just shut up, do you hear me?"

The tone of these retorts clearly lacked that sweetness one might reasonably expect from a man who's been crowned with God's glory. Since he'd started sinning, Duperrier tended toward vulgarity. His ascetic face was

beginning to fatten up due to his rich diet. It wasn't just his vocabulary that was growing heavy; his thoughts were gaining weight, too. His vision of paradise had changed markedly, for example. Instead of seeing a symphony of souls in diaphanous robes, the dwelling of the just appeared more and more clearly in his imagination as a vast dining room. Mme. Duperrier did not fail to notice the changes in her husband, and even began to entertain some fears for the future. Still, the prospect of seeing him descend into the depths did not yet outweigh the horror of being conspicuous. If the alternative was Duperrier in a halo, she thought, it was better to have a husband who was an atheist, a sensualist, and foul-mouthed like cousin Leopold. At least he wouldn't embarrass her in front of the neighbors.

Duperrier didn't need to make up his mind to sink into sloth. His haughty belief that his work at the office was far beneath his merit, along with his occasional drowsiness after a good meal, predisposed him to indolence. Since he was self-important enough to claim that he excelled at all things, good or bad, he rapidly became a model of idleness. The day he got fired by his furious boss, Duperrier received the news with his hat off.

"What's on your forehead?" asked his boss.

"A halo, sir."

"Oh really? Is that what you've been up to instead of working?"

When he told his wife of his dismissal, she asked him what he intended to do from then on.

"It seems like the right time to succumb to the sin of avarice," he replied gaily.

Of all the mortal sins, it turned out that avarice was the one which required the greatest strength of will. For someone who isn't greedy, it's a vice which is much harder to slide into than the others. When it stems from a conscious resolve, there's no way to distinguish it, at least in the early stages, from that excellent virtue of thriftiness. Duperrier imposed harsh disciplines on himself, such as keeping up his gluttony, and he managed to establish a solid reputation of avarice among his neighbors and acquaintances. He truly loved money for itself, and he learned better than anyone how to savor that wicked anguish that misers feel, knowing that they possess a creative force and that they prevent it from being exercised. As he counted his savings, the fruit of a heretofore laborious existence, he managed, little by little, to experience the frightful pleasure of wronging others by diverting a current of exchange and of life. This result, precisely because it took a lot of effort to achieve, gave Mme. Duperrier great hope. Since her husband had given in so easily to the lure of the other sins, God surely wouldn't hold this one against him, she reasoned, with such primal candor that she really made a rather pitiful victim. In actuality, his studied and patient progress in avarice resulted (necessarily) from a perverse drive which seemed to defy heaven. Despite this, even when Duperrier had grown so miserly that he put buttons from his underwear into the parish donation box, the gleam and thickness of his halo remained intact. Upon recognizing this new failure, the couple were left feeling helpless for several days.

Despite being prideful, gluttonous, wrathful, envious, slothful and avaricious, Duperrier felt his soul was still perfumed with innocence. Although they were deadly, the six sins he had cultivated were nonetheless those which a child might confess upon his first communion without

losing hope. The inordinately deadly sin of lust horrified him. It seemed to him that the others were consummated almost out of God's sight. For the others, whether it constituted a sin or just a peccadillo was a matter of dosage. But lust was full consent to the devil's work. Nocturnal enchantments foreshadowed the burning darkness of hell; darting tongues reminded him of the eternal flames, and as for moans of sensual delight and contorted bodies, they were practically the abominable wails of the damned and the tortured flesh of unending agony. Duperrier hadn't saved lust for last; he had simply refused to consider it. Even Mme. Duperrier was uneasy thinking about it. For many years, the couple had lived in a delightful state of chastity, and until the halo, every night had been a dream of white muslin. Thinking back on those years of continence made Mme. Duperrier feel bitter, because she was sure that the halo had been their reward. Only lust could undo the lily-white halo.

Duperrier long resisted his wife's arguments, but finally allowed himself to be persuaded. Once more, his sense of duty overcame his fear. Once he'd made his decision, he found himself embarrassingly ignorant. But his wife, who'd thought of everything, had bought him a revolting book which laid out, with clear and direct explanations, the basics of lust. It was a poignant spectacle in the evenings: this chaste man, halo on his forehead, reciting a chapter of the atrocious manual to his wife. His voice often stumbled on a vile word or an exceptionally indecent description. Once he'd acquired this theoretical baggage, he spent some more time debating whether he would consummate the sin of lust at home or elsewhere. Mme. Duperrier was of the opinion that all this should take place at home, citing economical reasons to which he was not insensitive. However, having weighed the pros and cons,

he judged that it was pointless to endanger her with vile practices that could be detrimental to her salvation. Thus, as a loyal husband, he courageously decided to take all the risks upon himself.

From then on, Duperrier spent most of his nights in shady hotels where he pursued his initiation with the neighborhood professionals. The halo, which he could hardly hide from the sight of these unsavory companions, got him into situations which were sometimes embarrassing and sometimes advantageous. At first, in his concern to follow the instructions laid forth in the manual, he devoted himself to the sin without much excitement, but with the methodical application of a dancer dissecting choreography. This concern for perfection which his pride imposed soon found its deplorable recompense in a certain notoriety that it earned him with the ladies. At the same time as he developed a keen taste for this type of exploits, Duperrier found them costly and suffered greatly from his avarice. One evening at Place Pigalle, he met an already fallen young thing of twenty named Marie-Jannick. It is believed that the poet Maurice Fombeure wrote these charming verses in her honor:

*'Tis Marie-Jannick
From Landivisiau
Killing a tick
Beneath her big toe.*

Marie-Jannick had come from Brittany six months earlier in order to work as a maid for a city councilman who was a socialist and an atheist. She couldn't bear to work for these godless people, so she bravely made her living on the Boulevard de Clichy. Duperrier's halo could hardly fail to make a very strong impression on this religious little soul. To Marie-Jannick, he seemed the equal

of Saint Yves and Saint Ronan. For his part, it wasn't long before he realized the influence he held over her, and he did not resist the temptation to turn this to practical advantage.

And so today, February 22, 1944, in the darkness of winter and war, Marie-Jannick, who will soon turn twenty-five, still saunters along the Boulevard de Clichy. At night, at blackout time, between Place Pigalle and Rue des Martyres, the passerby are moved to see a disk of light floating and bobbing in the night, looking a bit like the rings of Saturn. It is Duperrier, his forehead encircled by the glorious halo which he no longer bothers to hide from curious strangers. Duperrier, who is carrying the weight of the seven deadly sins, and who is dead to shame, oversees Marie-Jannick's work, reviving her flagging ardor with a kick in the ass, or waiting for her at a hotel entrance to count up the price of an embrace by the light of the halo. But from the depths of his decline and abjection, across the darkness of his conscience, sometimes a murmur rises to his lips to thank God for the absolute gratuitousness of his gifts.

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