



The Dream (The Rougon-Macquart) (Volume 16)

Emile Zola

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'The Dream' is the sixteenth volume in Zola's Rougon-Macquart series of novels of the Second Empire. Perhaps as a reaction to the criticism received by his preceding books - works of almost unrelenting, gritty realism - Zola here shows that his talents range beyond describing the corruption and oppression of the second, farcical, Napoleonic regime, and the daily struggle for survival. Here he portrays the very heart and feelings of an idealistic young girl, raised in a cloistered corner of a disappearing France, and now emerging from a childhood of security, love and certainty, into beautiful womanhood. ...On the morning after Christmas, as a snowstorm is burying the town of Beaumont-l'Eglise, a young girl is found huddling in the doorway of the cathedral. She is taken in and raised by a childless couple - ecclesiastical embroiderers - in happy innocence and far from the harsh realities of the world. While she learns her trade and becomes a highly-skilled embroideress, she loses herself in dreamlike visions inspired by her confused religious belief, legend, fantasy and hope. Her only education comes from reading stories in the 'Golden Legend' about the martyrs of the early Catholic Church. Her life is guided by the example of virgin saints - Agnes, Genevieve, Dorothy, Christine and Cecilia - who she believes watch over her, to help make her dream come true. She can see no reason why her dream of love and marriage to the most handsome and richest man in her little world, even if he is a Bishop's son, and a nobleman, will not be turned into miraculous reality. But, can a foundling girl, abandoned by her mother -now lost in the Parisian underworld, fallen into a life of depravity and crime - really rise to such heights from her lowly place, or dare even to think such thoughts? Especially when those all around her think her dream can never, must never, come true? And, if it should ever be realised, can her innocence and saintliness, can she herself, in her ignorance and naivety, hope to survive the world outside?

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