

Excerpt from: *Pour Devenir Fort et le Rester*

[How to Get Strong and Stay So]

By *Edmund Desbonnet*; Translated by *David Chapman*

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Chapter XXVI: “How Triat’s Memory was Saved from Oblivion”



riat’s method was perfect for the regeneration of the French nation, but the system was attacked by rivals after the great man’s death. Triat’s ideas then died out, and those who advocated ineffective methods of gymnastics seemed to gain acceptance.

Happily, Providence did not permit that such knowledge would be lost to us, and I was the instrument chosen by it to research and relocate Triat’s work, to study it, to coordinate it, to revive it and to publish it in my magazines and my books with the plan to save Triat from oblivion and to make the great and consoling shadow of this apostle of man’s regeneration hover over the France of tomorrow. Triat will finally see justice done to his memory which was saved from oblivion thanks to a series of circumstances that are interesting to relate.

In 1856 *The Family Museum* published an article under the byline of Paul Féval, the great novelist, on the Triat Gymnasium which at that time was located at 55 Avenue Montaigne in Paris. By a singular fate my mother, who lived in the country, possessed *only* one bound volume of *The Family Museum*—precisely the one for the year 1856. She kept this in a trunk along with other things that she took with her after her marriage. When my mother married, the trunk was carried up to the attic of our house and there this volume which was destined to have such importance in my own life remained for a long time, hidden under a pile of old things from the country.

From the age of twelve, I was consumed by the idea of becoming strong, and when I asked my father what I could do to become strong, he could not understand such harebrained ideas. But one certain day in January 1881, I was in the attic of the house where I often went in order to do gymnastics with a few apparatuses that I had brought up there. By chance, I found the trunk open and I amused myself by looking through its contents. There I discovered the volume of *The Family Museum*. I opened it, and the first picture that came before my eyes carried the title “The Triat Gymnasium.” It was the first time that I discovered a work on the subject that interested me so much.

You can well imagine that my amazement and joy were indescribable. After having read the article by Paul Féval, I had the feeling that I had just discovered my vocation. From that day the name of “Triat” danced in flaming letters before my eyes. Triat

became a god; I loved him though I did not know him, and his name was sacred to me. Triat’s work had been the spark that ignited the powder of my imagination, and in my childish mind there formed an idea which was still rather confused and in an embryonic state that someday I would become a professor like Triat and that I too would regenerate nineteenth century man. *Triat*, that name was graven forever in my heart, and when my mother allowed me to take the volume wherein Triat was mentioned, I kept it as if it were a sacred relic (I still have it to this day), and it became my guide and my constant companion.

I questioned my mother and father about Triat, but neither of them knew anything about him. I became discouraged. From 1881 to 1901, despite my research, I never heard anyone speak the name of Triat, and I found no other trace of him or of his work.

In 1886 I started the first [physical culture] school at Lille, later at Roubaix, and finally in Paris. It was not until March 28, 1901 that a father who had brought his son to me so that he could learn physical culture said to me, “Do not waste your time describing to me the benefits of exercise, for I have been convinced for a long time; I am a former student of Triat!” *Triat!* For the first time this much loved and venerated name resonated in my ears, and it was spoken, Ye Gods, by one of his former students! By someone who (more fortunate than I) had seen him, had spoken with him, better still had been trained by the man himself! Oh joy! I finally had before me a man who could speak to me of Triat: I was going to learn something about him, for until that time I had not possessed a single documented fact aside from the article by Paul Féval which had revealed to me the existence of this great man.

Mr. Chamerot, for such was the name of Triat’s former student, a printer in Paris, 2 Rue Saint-Simon, could only sing the praises of his former professor. He recounted his goodness, his devotion, his selflessness, his greatness of soul, his beauty, his strength, his passion for his art, and for his plans for the regeneration of the human species. After the war of 1870 Triat had dropped from sight; Chamerot knew at any rate that he had died around 1881. The man racked his brains, but he could not tell me any more information, but he gave me the names of several persons who might be able to put me on Triat’s track. Messrs. Soleirol, Martin, and Laplanche (who had been instructors with Triat) and Mr. Nicolas, a gymnastics instructor who ran a gymnasium at 88 Rue de Rome.

Immediately the next day I went to the Rue de Rome to see Mr. Nicolas who received me very cordially and was happy to speak with me about Triat whom he had known, loved, and with whom he had spent several years as one of his most eager pupils. He told me of the death of Triat’s instructors (Soleirol, Martin and Laplanche). but he informed me at the same time that Laplanche was Triat’s

nephew and that he had founded a gymnasium at Montpellier. This was the first real clue that I had uncovered (thanks to Mr. Nicolas), and I was thus put on the track that I had sought. Mr. Nicolas showed me the plans for the Normal School of Gymnastics that Triat planned to have built on the Island of Billancourt. I was amazed with this inspired project by its simplicity which immediately proved the great good sense of him who had conceived it. My admiration for Triat grew even greater.

Mr. Nicolas also showed me many dumbbells and globe barbells which were marked with Triat's logo; the had come from the sale of his gymnasium in 1879, and Mr. Nicolas had bought them to use in his own establishment.

He also showed me the two great dumbbells that Triat lifted, the heaviest one (91 kilos) with his right hand, and the other (84 kilos) with his left hand. I thereby became aware of Triat's strength. Mr. Nicolas explained to me the way which Triat lifted his dumbbells, thereby proving that from his twentieth to his forty-fifth year, Triat had without a doubt become the equal of the mightiest professional strongmen in weight lifting. But Mr. Nicolas had lessons to give, and I did not want to abuse his generosity, and I made a date for another day. At any rate, as soon as I returned home, I addressed a letter to "The Director of the Laplanche Gymnasium in Montpellier," to let him know of the plans that I had devised: to revive the name of Triat, to publish his portrait, research his work to make him known, continue and revive the principles of his method. Thanks to some unexpected luck, my letter was delivered to Mr. Laplanche the younger, son and successor to his father an a great admirer of Triat, his great-uncle. He sent me a complete and exact biography of Triat finally possessed the interesting documents after ing searched so long in vain, and thanks to the precious hints that I gathered in this way, I would have a guide my highly emotional quest. Better still, Mr. Lap announced to me that he was sending a large portrait of Triat which belonged to his grandmother, Triat's sister, and which featured the following inscription: "To my dear sister Eugenic. Hippolyte Triat."

I read and re-read the life story of this departed master with the fervor of a son who, mourning for his dead father, finds the last words of advice written to him by the man who gave him life.

When on the following day, the postman delivered the registered parcel which contained Triat's portrait, my hands shook with joy and fear. With joy because I was finally going to see him whom I wished to know, and with fear because I was afraid I would not find him as I had imagined him, and I would suffer disillusionment that would thereafter trouble my dreams.

I opened the box which contained a large portrait measuring about sixty-six centimeters (twenty-six inches) and which I unrolled with great emotion. I discovered the handsomest head of an apostle that one could imagine and the most beautiful, athletic body of a full-grown man that one could admire. My dream continue, the reality was even more beautiful than the image which I had constructed myself. There are men who claim that there is no happiness in life—if they had only been in my place on that day!

I remained for many minutes contemplating Triat's signature, and I attempted to discover his character by a graphological study. I then thought back to a bizarre coincidence concerning the date of his death. That occurred on January 11, 1881 at 3:00 in the afternoon, and this corresponded to the exact time when as a child I opened the book wherein I read his name for the first time. I once more experienced the same deep feelings as the time when he died—a time when I was urged on by an unknown force to go up to the attic of my house and pluck from an old, rustic trunk a book which was dull and without interest for my mother, but which she preserved for twenty-five years without purpose or reason, and which I opened to the page where his name was printed. Thus, the dead man's soul had wanted to create the first link in a chain that was destined to connect me to the work of regenerating mankind which was begun by him. And he had chosen me to continue an endeavor which he had not had the fortune to complete.

At last, while smoothing out the portrait which had been created by the post office cancellation, Triat's image changed position, and his magnetic eyes appeared to move and to focus first on me and then to move to the left in the direction of a section of column as if he wanted to point to that spot exactly. I automatically cast my eyes on this column which served as a decoration for the portrait, and I discovered in a very dark corner a few illegible words which time, humidity, and dust had mostly effaced. Nevertheless, with a little patience and using some bread from the center of the loaf, I succeeded in completely uncovering the letters written on the column—letters which formed two simple words linked by a conjunction, but what words! They are the most respectable that one can utter here on earth: *God and Truth*. That was Triat's motto. And on that particular day I did not go further in my investigations.

I was transfixed by the man, his importance, and his work. I understood that my duty was to research, with the help of God, the Truth that Triat had known and which the French people had not wanted (doubtless because the time for that truth had not yet arrived). Thus is it said that he who plants a tree is not permitted to harvest the fruit.

