Marcel Aymé

The Walker-through-walls and other stories

TRANSLATED BY NORMAN DENNY

Introduction

ANDRÉ MAUROIS told me not long before his death and that of Marcel Aymé (they died in the same month) that some years earlier it had been proposed to Aymé that he should stand for election to the Académie Française. Election to that illustrious body of the forty 'immortals' is the highest honour that French letters can bestow, and Aymé's chances, it seems, were excellent. But he would not stand. There is an initiation ceremony at which the new member, besides wearing the famous green uniform, is required to make a formal speech, a *discours de réception*. This, said Maurois, was the reason why Aymé refused.

I can well believe it. I think he would have been quite incapable of delivering the kind of high-sounding oration that the occasion called for (nothing could have prevented an irreverent and possibly bawdy chuckle from creeping in), and he was, in any case, the shyest of men. Also, I find it impossible to imagine him in any kind of uniform. The first time I met him he was wearing a tweed suit of so startling a pattern that I was almost hypnotised – he had dressed up, I think, in honour of the important representative of the English publisher who was making a bid for his works. I am glad to say that I never again saw him in that suit, although his clothes always struck an individual note. He also wore very large dark glasses that covered half his face.

That first meeting (it must have been in 1946) took place in the offices of his French publisher after I had discussed business arrangements with a member of the firm. I was then led into another room to make the acquaintance of the author. It was a strange interview. We sat there, the two of us alone, for perhaps half-an-hour, and although I suppose Aymé must now and then have said something I cannot remember a word he said. It seems to me now to have been an unbroken monologue on my part while he sat attentively listening, hastily offering me a cigarette whenever I put one out (he was a heavy smoker himself), and smiling that singularly sweet and gentle smile, which at the time caused me to wonder if he were secretly laughing at my Englishness and/or my French.

He was a secret man. Partly, no doubt, it was a habit contracted during the Occupation, that appalling period when every Frenchman was forced to be secret; but it was essentially a part of himself. It was due to shyness, but also to something else. He joined no movements, shunned all gatherings, particularly literary, and was never in any sense *engagé* – wore no uniform, in fact. Although his name was a household word in France, and his writings held in very high esteem, I was surprised to discover how few people in the literary world could claim to know him, even as well as I came to do.

He lived quietly and industriously with his charming and devoted wife in an apartment near the Sacré Coeur, and also, when the plays had made him rich, in a small country house not far from Paris. But he had no lack of friends, as one discovered when one went with him into the bars and bistros round the *butte* of Montmartre. In places such as this, and it did not matter how disreputable they were, he was Monsieur Marcel to everyone, and always welcome. The shyness dropped off him, but not the silence. He liked to listen to people talking, whatever nonsense they talked, and nothing escaped the sensitive

eyes behind those huge dark glasses. I saw him at his happiest in the *Lapin agile* (properly the Lapin à Gilles) just off the Place du Tertre, of which the *patron* was among his particular friends. The *Lapin agile*, where they sang old French songs, had become a *boîte touristique*, but I am sure that never worried Aymé. Tourists are also people, and people were what mattered to him. And he dearly loved the songs.

Although his books are filled with laughter I never knew him to laugh outright, and although his silence was partly due to shyness it was also a deliberate, contained silence masking an intensity of feeling that could only be allowed to appear in his work, and then only at one remove. He could not make speeches, but when the spirit moved him, generally in the privacy of his home, he could let fall a terse, lapidary comment that was sometimes devastating. He never condemned, but he was certainly not dispassionate in his judgements. He was intensely human, warm and kind (he had a particular love of children); but behind all this there was the steel and arrogance of the creative artist who knows decidedly what he is trying to do.

I cannot pretend to have known him well, although we were on terms of christian-names and 'tu'. I saw him only at intervals, on comparatively brief occasions, and we corresponded now and then. But I doubt if I should have come to know him much better even if I had seen much more of him. Translating his work told me far more about him than he himself would ever have done. I greatly mourned his death and still do, and I shall always remember that gentle and heart-warming smile.

What follows was written as an introduction to the first English collection of his short stories, *Across Paris*, which appeared

in 1957. At that time I was very much immersed in Aymé's writings, and this note was intended as a brief general assessment of his work, of which the contents of the present volume are a small but broadly representative part. I have left it unchanged. There is nothing that I would want to subtract, and nothing that I can usefully add.

Unlike the novel, the collection of short stories is never conceived with an eye to the blurb. Each of its separate pieces represents the idea and mood of a moment, and it is not possible to run up for the use of reviewers a very brief, very weighty summary which will save them the trouble of reading the book.

Thus Marcel Aymé, in the signed blurb which he ran up ('trousser' is his own word) for the most recent of the six volumes of short stories from which this selection has been made. But although the blurb amounts to an apology for writing short stories at all, since this (says Aymé) is no longer done by the best writers, it does not refer to the biggest hurdle that has yet to be overcome, the general conviction among publishers that short stories are almost as unsaleable as poetry, besides costing more. It is for this reason that although eight of Aymé's novels, and two volumes of his children's stories, have appeared in English since 1948, his short stories are still almost unknown to English readers.

These sixty-odd stories, a few of which are too long to be called short, amount to only a relatively small part of Marcel Aymé's large literary output, which also includes sixteen novels, at least half a dozen plays, the children's stories and a literary-philosophical diversion entitled *Le Confort intellectuel*. They may have been overshadowed to some extent

by the success of the novels and latterly of the plays. Nevertheless they contain some of the very best of Aymé's work, and I believe it is a good deal owing to them (allowing, of course, for the fact that he happens to be French) that he is so much better understood in France than elsewhere.

The reader who comes to Marcel Aymé simply by way of his novels is apt to find them perplexing if no worse, although it would be hard to maintain that he is unorthodox as a novelist. There is certainly no obscurity in his writing, which indeed is remarkable for its elegant clarity and precision, and never pompous or verbose. He tells a story with great skill, and since his powers of invention seem inexhaustible he always has plenty of story to tell. His characters, eccentric as they often are and enlarged on an almost Dickensian scale, are still decidedly human, seen with a shrewd and sensitive eye, sometimes mocked, sometimes castigated, often treated with a gentleness which lays him open to the charge of sentimentality, always loved, even the most deplorable among them, and never patronised. And through it all there runs a stream of gaiety and sadness, vigour, richness and abundance, an outpouring of life. What more can a novelist offer his readers? Nevertheless for many people the Aymé novels remain bewildering, not to say infuriating. What is the man getting at? What label shall be attached to him? What does he mean? In fact, does he really mean anything at all?

The trouble lies in a particular kind of unorthodoxy. Aymé looks at the world from his own especial viewpoint, of which one characteristic is that it does not recognise the commonly accepted frontier between the real and the unreal. He has pushed the frontier farther back, extending it to encompass not only life as it looks and happens, but life as it is dreamed. Fantasy and everyday reality rub shoulders on his stage, the one as substantial as the other, making their entrance without any

preparatory roll of drums or even a dimming of the lights. The portrait of the Green Mare surveys the sexual customs of the villagers of Claquebue with all the gravity, or nearly all, of a Kinsey; the mythical figure of La Vouivre with her escort of serpents causes turmoil among the people of Vaux-le-Dévers, not by her palpable physical attractions but (this is where realism enters) by the much more important fact that she possesses a ruby of inestimable price; the prosaic businessman, Raoul Cerusier, in what I hold to be the most prosaic of the novels, methodically sets about accommodating his life to the circumstance that he has been miraculously endowed with a new face. This matter-of-fact juxtaposition of the real and the unreal is at the least puzzling; and unorthodoxy also shows itself in other, less sensational ways. The reader, trustfully embarked on a sedate paragraph in Aymé's 'prim' manner (he has a good many manners) may be suddenly taken aback by a ribald chuckle, as flustering as a belch in a moment of ritual silence. He may be swept abruptly from tenderness to acid irony, from brutality to riotous farce, from sober fact to frank absurdity. In the end it can be seen that these apparent whimsies were really not so whimsical. They are not simply effects, tricks of showmanship designed to startle and amaze. They are nicely calculated, they have their bearing on the matter. And the matter is there, for anyone who will look, propounded by a writer who at times appears almost as severely moralistic as an Old Testament prophet, only less solemn. But having completed the jolting journey through the strangely heightened landscape of an Aymé novel, encountering so many quirks and contradictions, the traveller may find himself a little breathless at the end, morally rumpled, ruffled and bemused.

Readers who resent this kind of treatment, the more literal-minded and those in particular who dislike any fiction that does not put them to sleep, are lost to Aymé. They will not open this

book. But others may find in the short stories a kind of simplification that brings him into clearer proportions. Not even Aymé can crowd all his different aspects within the compass of a single short story, although there are times (in *The Wine of Paris*, for instance) when he seems to be doing his best. One mood and one idea, as he says; and so he may be seen to some extent resolved into his separate parts. But something else emerges from these stories, a common denominator leading to what is possibly the only general statement that can be made about Aymé which does not call for instant qualification. They are all fables. This I believe to be the key to the whole of Aymé's writing, with its very distinctive quality, its paradoxes and apparent contradictions – a fact that is perhaps contradictory in itself. With all his virtuosity, his acute contemporary eye, his wit, sophistication and abounding cleverness, he is a writer of fables in the true sense of the word.

I mean by a fable a story springing from a deeper level than that of the everyday consciousness, at once older and younger, simpler, more candid, and yet more complex; a story that comprehends the marvellous. Whether it also intends, or achieves, any moral purpose is beside the point. With or without moral, these stories are all fables. And I will cite in evidence the one least easily to be reconciled with this contention.

Across Paris belongs to a particularly vigorous and productive period in Aymé's working life, the period immediately following the liberation of France. The war scattered French writers all ways. There were some, such as Vercors with *Les Éditions de Minuit* and Claude Morgan with *Les Lettres Françaises*, who turned to active resistance, publishing their own clandestine works and those of other writers (Jean Paulhan, Elsa Triolet, Jean Cassou, Mauriac, Éluard, Aragon and Sartre among them) under the nose of the Gestapo. There were

other French writers who conducted themselves in a manner very much more agreeable to the Occupying Power, and yet others who managed to get abroad or who gave up writing altogether. Aymé did none of these things. He simply wrote tales, such as *The Second Face* ('La Belle Image', Paris 1941) and *The Fable and the Flesh* ('La Vouivre', Paris 1943) which had nothing to do with war or politics. But although he continued to live quietly and unobtrusively on the upper slopes of Montmartre, he did so with eyes wide open. He is not merely fooling, he is indeed being perfectly serious, when he says in *The Wine of Paris*, 'There are certain lateral trends which have started all kinds of contemporary gimmicks fizzing at the back of my head. I simply haven't the heart to write about sunbathed terraces and merry little wines.' A great deal of fizzing went on, and when at last the lid was lifted it came bubbling out – *The Transient Hour* ('Le Chemin des Écoliers', Paris 1946), *Across Paris*, which appeared in the volume of stories published in 1947, *Fanfare in Blémont* ('Uranus', Paris 1948) and 'Le Confort intellectuel' (1949), a remarkable and brilliant work which must, however, be read in French.

All these, the outcome of much brooding over the hideous moral problems by which all Frenchmen had been assailed, reveal a changed Aymé, forthright and often savage, less airy altogether in his treatment of the contemporary scene than the urbane satirist who wrote *The Miraculous Barber* ('Travelingue') just before the war. *Across Paris*, one of the best stories he has written, is characteristic of that period, and uncharacteristic of Aymé as a whole, inasmuch as it contains almost no fantasy or overt humour. It is 'straight' fiction, extravagant but firmly bedded in reality, that leaves no doubt as to what it is driving at. It is a morality in the guise of a thriller. But the fabulous quality is there from the start, in the queer opening scene in the cellar, in the dark streets, in the mystifying

and at moments towering figure of Grandgil. It is a tale pervaded with the sense of marvels; and meticulously concerned though it is with the circumstances of a particular time, it yet contrives to be outside it.

The sense of marvels is, of course, nothing but the sense of life, and that is Aymé's only secret. The life which he sees and cherishes is too rich and spacious, too miraculous even at its worst, to be pared and watered down to fit within the bounds of a conventional realism. It cannot be photographed. The richness amid squalor is what matters. (See *Rue de l'Évangile*, so uniquely an Aymé story, the very essence, such as only he could have written.) The richness is *always* what matters to Aymé, the vigour and abundance of life, ugly and brutal as it may be; the innocence and cunning of simple people (without cunning how would they survive; and what finally matters except that they should survive?) and the love and the laughter.

The love of simple people, and the laughter. The laughter above all. A reviewer in a refined English weekly, who took a sturdy dislike to *The Green Mare*, surmised that it was Aymé's ambition 'to humanise the snigger'. The remark, whatever it means, is only worth quoting because it is so wrong. If there is any sniggering to be found in the English version of Aymé's works his translator must accept the blame, although I might argue that there are things which, translated into English, are not easily divorced from the snigger. Aymé for his part might ask why in the world he should snigger, or want anyone else to snigger, over things at which the French are accustomed to laugh unashamedly and without caring if the joke is as old as the first joker. Aymé does not snigger. He laughs, loudly or silently as the case may be (in private, always silently), unexpectedly, outrageously, seldom cruelly and never viciously, but always, I think, with affection for the thing he laughs at, even when he hates it, simply because it has made him laugh. His

laughter may shock and sometimes hurt, but it does not smear. When he laughs at the Church, as he often does, it is sophistry and formal morality he is laughing at, not simple faith. He laughs as Rabelais laughed, at the same things and for the same reasons.

And since at last the name of Rabelais has crept into this note, because it would not be kept out, and since Aymé is so clearly in the line of his successors, I may quote Rabelais' own affirmation:

Mieux est de ris que de larmes escripre
Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

And proper to Marcel Aymé, who would, I am sure, never claim for his writings that they are designed to instruct or improve or to solve any problems. They are designed to serve life, to help with the business of living, and that is all.

NORMAN DENNY

The Walker-Through-Walls

THERE lived in Montmartre, on the third floor of No. 75*bis*, Rue d'Orchampt, an excellent man named Dutilleul who possessed the singular gift of being able to walk through walls without experiencing any discomfort. He wore *pince-nez* and a little black beard, and he was a third-grade clerk in the Ministry of Registration. In winter he went by bus to his office, and in summer he went on foot, under his bowler-hat.

Dutilleul had just entered his forty-third year when his especial aptitude was revealed to him. One evening, having been caught by a brief failure of the electricity in the vestibule of his small bachelor apartment, he fumbled for a moment in the darkness, and when the lights went on again found himself on the third-floor landing. Since his front door was locked on the inside the incident caused him to reflect, and despite the protests of his reason he resolved to go in as he had come out, by walking through the wall. This strange attainment, which seemed to correspond to none of his aspirations, preyed slightly on his mind, and on the following day, a Saturday, he took advantage of the week-end to call on a neighbouring doctor and put the case to him. The doctor, after convincing himself of the truth of his story, discovered upon examination that the cause of the trouble lay in the helicoidal hardening of the strangulatory wall of the thyroid vesicle. He prescribed a regime of in-

tensive exertion, and, at the rate of two cachets a year, the absorption into the system of tetravalent reintegration powder, a mixture of rice flour and centaur's hormones.

After taking the first cachet Dutilleul put the rest away in a drawer and thought no more about them. As for the intensive exertion, his work as a civil servant was ordered by custom which did not permit of any excess; neither did his leisure hours, which were devoted to the daily paper and his stamp collection, call for any unreasonable expenditure of energy. So that at the end of a year his knack of walking through walls remained unimpaired; but he never made use of it, except inadvertently, having little love of adventure and being non-receptive to the lures of the imagination. It did not even occur to him to enter his own apartment otherwise than by the door, after duly turning the key in the lock. Perhaps he would have grown old in his sedate habits, without ever being tempted to put his gift to the test, had not an extraordinary event suddenly occurred to revolutionise his existence. M. Mouron, the head of his sub-section at the ministry, was transferred to other duties and replaced by a M. Lécuyer, who was brisk of speech and wore a small military moustache. From the first day this newcomer manifested the liveliest disapproval of the *pince-nez* which Dutilleul wore attached to a short chain, and of his little black beard, and he elected to treat him as a tiresome and not over-clean elderly encumbrance. Worst of all, he saw fit to introduce into the work of his sub-section certain far-reaching reforms which were well calculated to trouble the peace of mind of his subordinate. Dutilleul was accustomed to begin his letters with the following formula: 'With reference to your esteemed communication of the such-and-such instant, and having regard to our previous exchange of letters on this subject, I have the honour to inform you . . .' For which M. Lécuyer proposed to substitute a more trans-Atlantic form of

words: 'Yours of the such-and-such. I beg to state . . .' Dutilleul could not accustom himself to this epistolary terseness. Despite himself he reverted with a machine-like obstinacy to the traditional form, thereby incurring the increasing animosity of his superior. The atmosphere of the Ministry of Registration became almost oppressive to him. He went apprehensively to work in the morning, and at night, after going to bed, he would often lie brooding for as much as a quarter of an hour before falling asleep.

Outraged by a reactionary stubbornness which threatened to undermine the success of his reforms, M. Lécuyer relegated Dutilleul to a small and sombre room, scarcely more than a cupboard, next door to his own office. It was entered by a low, narrow door giving on to the corridor, and which bore in capital letters the legend: 'BACK FILES'. Dutilleul resignedly acquiesced in this unprecedented humiliation, but when he read some more than usually sanguinary story in his newspaper he found himself dreaming that M. Lécuyer was the victim.

One day his chief burst into his cupboard brandishing a letter and bellowing:

'This must be done again! I insist upon your rewriting this unspeakable document which is a disgrace to my sub-section!'

Dutilleul was about to protest, but in a voice of thunder M. Lécuyer informed him that he was a routine-besotted mole, and crumpling the letter flung it in his face. Dutilleul was a modest man, but proud. Left alone in his cupboard he felt his temperature rising, and suddenly he was seized with an inspiration. Leaving his seat he passed into the wall between his chief's room and his own, but he did so with caution, so that only his head emerged on the other side. M. Lécuyer, seated again at his desk, his pen still quivering, was in the act of striking out a comma from the text of a letter submitted by a subordinate for

his approval, when he heard the sound of a cough in his room. Looking up he perceived with unspeakable dismay the head of Dutilleul, seemingly affixed to the wall like a trophy of the chase. But this head was alive. Through the *pince-nez*, with their length of chain, the eyes glared balefully at him. What is more, the head spoke.

'Sir,' it said, 'you are a scoundrel, a blockhead and a mountebank.'

M. Lécuyer, his mouth gaping with horror, had difficulty in withdrawing his gaze from the apparition. At length he heaved himself out of his chair, plunged into the corridor and flung open the door of the cupboard. Dutilleul, pen in hand, was seated in his accustomed place, in an attitude of tranquil and devoted industry. M. Lécuyer stared at him for some time in silence, and then, after muttering a few words, returned to his office. Scarcely had he resumed his seat than the head again appeared on the wall.

'Sir, you are a scoundrel, a blockhead and a mountebank.'

In the course of that day alone the terrifying head manifested itself twenty-three times, and on the following days it appeared with a similar frequency. Having acquired a certain skill at the game, Dutilleul was no longer content merely to abuse his chief. He uttered obscure threats, for example proclaiming in a sepulchral voice punctuated with truly demoniac laughter:

'The werewolf is here, the end is near! (*laughter*). Flesh creeps and terror fills the air! (*laughter*).'

Hearing which, the unhappy sub-section chief grew yet more pale, yet more breathless, while the hairs stood rigid on his head and the sweat of anguish trickled down his spine. During the first day he lost a pound in weight. In the course of the ensuing week, besides almost visibly melting away, he developed a tendency to eat soup with a fork and to greet the guardians of the law with a military salute. At the beginning of the second week

an ambulance called at his dwelling and bore him off to a mental home.

Being thus delivered from the tyranny of M. Lécuyer, Dutilleul could return to his cherished formula – 'With reference to your esteemed communication of the such-and-such . . .' Yet he was not satisfied. There was now a yearning in him, a new, imperious impulse which was nothing less than the need to walk through walls. It is true that he had ample opportunities of doing so, in his apartment for example, of which he did not neglect to avail himself. But the man possessing brilliant gifts cannot long be content to squander them on trifles. Moreover, the act of walking through a wall cannot be said to constitute an end in itself. It is a mere beginning, the start of an adventure calling for an outcome, a realisation – calling, in short, for a reward. Dutilleul was well aware of this. He felt an inner need to expand, a growing desire to fulfil and surpass himself, and a restless hankering which was in some sort the call of the other side of the wall. But an objective, alas, was lacking. He sought inspiration in his daily paper, particularly in the columns devoted to politics and sport, both of which seemed to him commendable activities; but perceiving finally that these offered no outlet for persons capable of walking through walls, he fell back on the crime columns, which proved to be rich in suggestion.

Dutilleul's first burglary took place in a large credit establishment on the right bank of the Seine. After passing through a dozen walls and partitions he thrust his hand into a number of strong-boxes, filled his pockets with banknotes and before leaving signed his crime in red chalk, using the pseudonym of 'The Werewolf', adorned with a handsome flourish which was reproduced in all the papers next day. By the end of a week 'The Werewolf' had achieved an extraordinary celebrity. The heart of the public went out unreservedly to this phenomenal burglar who so prettily mocked the police. He drew attention to himself

each night by a fresh exploit carried out at the expense, now of a bank, now of a jeweller's shop or of some wealthy individual. In Paris, as in the provinces, there was no woman with romance in her heart who had not a fervent desire to belong body and soul to the terrible Werewolf. After the theft of the famous Burdigala diamond and the robbing of the Crédit Municipal, which occurred during the same week, the enthusiasm of the crowd reached the point of delirium. The Minister of the Interior was compelled to resign, dragging with him in his fall the Minister of Registration. Nevertheless, Dutilleul, now one of the richest men in Paris, never failed to arrive punctually at the office, and was spoken of as a candidate for the *palmes académiques*. And every morning, at the Ministry of Registration, he had the pleasure of hearing his colleagues discuss his exploits of the previous night. 'This Werewolf,' they said, 'is a stupendous fellow, a superman, a genius.' Hearing such praise, Dutilleul turned pink with embarrassment and behind the *pince-nez* his eyes shone with friendship and gratitude. A day came when the atmosphere of sympathy so overwhelmed him that he felt he could keep the secret no longer. Surveying with a last twinge of shyness the group of his colleagues arrayed round a newspaper containing an account of the robbery of the Banque de France, he said in a diffident voice: 'As a matter of fact, *I'm* the Werewolf.' The confession was received with a huge and interminable burst of laughter, and the nickname of 'Werewolf' was at once mockingly bestowed on him. That evening, at the time of leaving the ministry, he was the object of endless pleasantries on the part of his fellow-workers, and life seemed to him less rosy.

A few days later the Werewolf allowed himself to be caught by a police patrol in a jeweller's shop on the Rue de la Paix. He had inscribed his signature on the safe and was singing a drinking-song while smashing windows with a massive gold tankard.

It would have been a simple matter for him to escape by merely slipping through a wall, but everything leads one to suppose that he wished to be arrested, probably for the sole purpose of confounding the colleagues whose incredulity had so mortified him. These were indeed greatly astounded when the newspapers next day published Dutilleul's picture on the front page. They bitterly regretted having underrated their inspired *confrère*, and did him homage by growing little beards. Some of them, carried away by remorse and admiration, went so far as to try to get their hands on the wallets or watches of their friends and relations.

It may well be considered that to allow oneself to be caught by the police in order to impress a few colleagues is to display an extreme frivolity unworthy of an eminent public figure; but the apparent exercise of free-will plays little part in a resolution of this kind. In sacrificing his liberty Dutilleul thought he was yielding to an arrogant desire for revenge, whereas in fact he was merely following the ineluctable course of his destiny. No man who walks through walls can consider his career even moderately fulfilled if he has not had at least one taste of prison. When Dutilleul entered the precincts of the Santé he had a feeling of being the spoilt child of fortune. The thickness of the walls was to him a positive delight. On the very day following his incarceration the warders discovered to their stupefaction that he had driven a nail into the wall of his cell and had hung from it a gold watch belonging to the prison Governor. He either could not or would not disclose how the article had come into his possession. The watch was restored to its owner and the next day was again found at the bedside of the Werewolf, together with the first volume of *The Three Musketeers*, borrowed from the Governor's library. The whole staff of the prison was on edge. The warders complained, moreover, of receiving kicks on the bottom coming from some inex-

plicable source. It seemed that the walls no longer had ears but had feet instead. The detention of the Werewolf had lasted a week when the Governor, entering his office one morning, found the following letter on his desk:

'SIR:

With reference to our interview of the 17th instant, and having regard to your general instruction of May 15th of last year, I have the honour to inform you that I have just concluded my perusal of *The Three Musketeers*, Vol. II, and that I propose to escape tonight between 11.25 p.m. and 11.35 p.m.

I beg to remain, Sir,
With expressions of the deepest respect,
Your obedient servant,
THE WEREWOLF.'

Despite the extremely close watch kept upon him that night, Dutilleul escaped at 11.30. The news, when it became known to the public on the following day, occasioned an outburst of tremendous enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Dutilleul, having achieved another burglary which set the seal on his popularity, seemed to have little desire to hide himself and walked freely about Montmartre without taking any precautions. Three days after his escape he was arrested in the Café du Rêve on the Rue Clignancourt, where he was drinking a *vin blanc citron* with a few friends.

Being taken back to the Santé and secured behind triple locks in a gloomy dungeon, the Werewolf left it the same evening and passed the night in the guest-room of the Governor's apartment. At about the nine the next morning he rang for his *petit déjeuner* and allowed himself to be captured in bed, without offering any resistance, by the warders summoned for

the purpose. The outraged Governor caused a special guard to be posted at the door of his cell and put him on bread and water. Towards midday he went out and had lunch at a neighbouring restaurant, and, having finished his coffee, telephoned the Governor as follows:

'My dear Governor, I am covered with confusion. When I left the prison a short time ago I omitted to take your wallet, so that I am now penniless in a restaurant. Will you be so good as to send someone to pay my bill?'

The Governor hurried to the spot in person, and so far forgot himself as to utter threats and abuse. Wounded in his deepest feelings, Dutilleul escaped the following night, never to return. This time he took the precaution of shaving his black tuft of beard and substituting hornrimmed spectacles for the *pince-nez* and chain. A sports cap and a suit of plus-fours in a loud check completed his transformation. He established himself in a small apartment in the Avenue Junot where, during the period preceding his first arrest, he had installed a part of his furniture and the possessions which he most valued. The notoriety attaching to his name was beginning to weary him, and since his stay in the Santé he had become rather blasé in the matter of walking through walls. The thickest, the proudest of them seemed to him no more than the flimsiest of screens, and he dreamed of thrusting his way into the very heart of some massive pyramid. While meditating on the project of a trip to Egypt he lived the most tranquil of lives, divided between his stamp collection, the cinema and prolonged strolls about Montmartre. So complete was his metamorphosis that, clean-shaven and hornrimmed-spectacled, he passed his best friends in the street without being recognised. Only the painter, Gen Paul, whom no detail escaped of any change in the physiognomy of an old resident of the quarter, succeeded in the end in penetrating his disguise. Finding himself face to face with

Dutilleul at the corner of the Rue de l'Abreuvoir, he could not restrain himself from remarking in his crude slang:

'Dis donc, je vois que tu t'es miché en gigolpince pour tétarer ceux de la sûrepige' – which roughly means, in common speech: 'I see you've got yourself up like a man of fashion to baffle the inspectors of the Sûreté.'

'Ah!' murmured Dutilleul. 'So you've recognised me!'

He was perturbed by this and resolved to hasten his departure for Egypt. But it was on the afternoon of this very day that he fell in love with a ravishing blonde whom he twice encountered in the Rue Lepic, at a quarter of an hour's interval. He instantly forgot his stamp collection, Egypt and the Pyramids. The blonde, for her part, had gazed at him with considerable interest. Nothing stirs the imagination of the young women of the present day more than plus-fours and horn-rimmed spectacles: they have a flavour of film scripts, they set one dreaming of cocktails and Californian nights. Unfortunately the lady – so Dutilleul was informed by Gen Paul – was married to a violent and jealous man. This suspicious husband, who himself led a dissolute life, regularly forsook his wife between the hours of ten at night and four in the morning; but before doing so he locked her in her bedroom and padlocked all the shutters. During the daytime he kept a close eye on her, even going so far on occasions as to follow her as she went along the streets of Montmartre.

'Always snooping, you see. He's one of those coarse-minded so-and-so's that don't stand for anyone poaching on their preserves.'

But Gen Paul's warning served only to inflame Dutilleul's ardour. Encountering the young woman in the Rue Tholozé on the following day, he boldly followed her into a *crèmerie*, and while she was awaiting her turn to be served he told her of his respectful passion and that he knew all – the villainous hus-

band, the locked door and the padlocked shutters – but that he proposed nevertheless to visit her that same evening. The blonde flushed scarlet while the milk-jug trembled in her hand. Her eyes melting with tenderness she murmured weakly: 'Alas, Monsieur, it is impossible.'

On the evening of that glorious day, towards ten o'clock, Dutilleul was at his post in the Rue Norvins, keeping watch on a solid outer wall behind which was situated a small house of which he could see nothing except the weather-cock and the chimney-stack. A door in this wall opened and a man emerged who, after locking it carefully behind him, went down the hill towards the Avenue Junot. Dutilleul waited until he saw him vanish in the far distance at the turn of the road, after which he counted ten. Then he darted forward, skipped lightly with an athlete's stride into the wall, and running through all obstacles penetrated into the bedroom of the beautiful captive. She received him with transports of delight and they made love till an advanced hour.

The next day Dutilleul had the vexation to suffer from a severe headache. It was a matter of no importance, and he had no intention of failing to keep his rendezvous for so little. However, chancing to discover a few cachets scattered at the bottom of a drawer, he swallowed one in the morning and another in the afternoon. By the evening his headache was bearable, and his state of exaltation caused him to forget it. The young woman was awaiting him with all the impatience to which her recollections of the previous evening had given rise, and that night they made love until three in the morning. Upon his departure, as he passed through the inner and outer walls of the house, Dutilleul had a sense of unaccustomed friction at his hips and shoulders. However, he did not think this worthy of any particular attention. Only when he came to penetrate the surrounding wall did he become definitely aware of a feeling of

resistance. He seemed to be moving in a substance that was still fluid, but which was thickening so that it seemed to gain in consistency with every movement that he made. Having succeeded in thrusting the whole of his body into the thickness of the wall, he found that he could no longer progress, and in terror he recalled the two cachets he had taken during the day. These cachets, which he had mistaken for aspirin, had in reality contained the tetravalent reintegration powder prescribed by the doctor a year before. The medicine, aided by his intensive exertions, was suddenly having its intended effect.

Dutilleul was, as it were, petrified in the interior of the wall. He is there to this day, incorporated in the stone. Nightbirds descending the Rue Norvins at the hour when the clamour of Paris has died down, may sometimes hear a stifled voice seeming to come from beyond the tomb, which they take to be the moaning of the wind as it whistles at the crossroads of the Butte. It is Werewolf Dutilleul mourning for his glorious career and his too-brief love. Occasionally on a winter's night the painter, Gen Paul, taking down his guitar, ventures forth into the echoing solitude of the Rue Norvins to console the unhappy prisoner with a song; and the notes, flying from his benumbed fingers, pierce to the heart of the stone like drops of moonlight.

The Retreat from Moscow

BENT over his exercise book Copper-nob was writing and re-writing the sentence 'I am lacking in respect for my teacher and schoolfellows', conjugating the verb as he did so, the tense he had now reached being the imperfect subjunctive. He was not hurrying. His class-master had set him the punishment, to be performed during the recreation period, without fixing any time limit. In the school playground the boys were playing marbles or tag or just fooling about, and now and then he raised his head to listen to the familiar sound of their altercations.

'I said it first!'

'You didn't.'

'I did. I said – '

'Nuts!'

'Well, all the same, I did!'

Every now and then a row of heads passed in procession by the window, those of the boys who were paying the penalty for not having learnt their history. They had been let off more lightly than Copper-nob, being merely condemned to spend the 'break' marching in single file and in silence round the playground. This did not deter Léon Jars, who was at the end of the column, from pausing to say through the half-open window:

'Anyway we're getting some fresh air. It serves you right for not showing us respect.'

'I don't look half as silly as you do,' said Copper-nob.

He held up a paper dart to show how agreeably he was passing the time, but as Léon Jars hurried after the rest of the defaulters he hid it away and picked up his pen again. He finished the imperfect subjunctive, and went on to the future tense, embarking upon it with some satisfaction: – 'I shall be lacking in respect for my teacher and schoolfellows.' For Copper-nob was unrepentant. He had said what had to be said and if Monsieur Monge, their class-master, had had any real discernment he would have warmly applauded his devotion to the things of the mind. It was true that the matter had turned out oddly, and to this extent excuses could be made. Old Monge had not known about Léon Jars's disgusting behaviour, which had been the cause of the incident during the history lesson. In fact the whole thing was really due to that great fool Jars, who was always making trouble.

Copper-nob had hair of a particularly fiery tint, and in the whole of Varpois his mother was the only one to call him by his Christian name of Pierre. There were certain subjects, such as history, civics and geography, in which he was advanced for his age. He was also good at spelling and mental arithmetic.

'Now Pierre Chauvet,' said Monsieur Monge, 'he's not even eleven, but he could pass his lower grade examination tomorrow.'

The others were rather jealous, especially Léon Jars, a tall, weedy boy of thirteen, known as 'Lanky', who was proud of the fact that he already had fluff growing under his arms and elsewhere. He was the one who was most merciless in making jokes about Copper-nob's hair.

'Gosh!' he would say. 'Better not let anyone blow on it or it'll burst into flames!'

Copper-nob was by no means ashamed of being a redhead. He secretly thought it a rather distinguished colour, but as a

matter of principle he took the line that intellectual accomplishments were in any event more important than mere physical appearances.

'So suppose I am a redhead?' he would answer calmly. 'Anyway I'm top in dictation, and by the time you know the names of the French Departments as well as I do your hair will be white, if you've still got any left. And that's being optimistic, because the fact is, people who are born stupid go on being stupid all their life.'

Retorts couched in these lofty terms sometimes led to strenuous debate as to the value of the instruction they received in school. Lanky Jars thought little of it, and scornfully weighed the fruits of scholarship against the practical requirements of tilling the soil.

'It's all very well being able to spell a plough,' he said, 'but it doesn't help you to handle one.'

'There's other things besides handling ploughs,' said Copper-nob.

'You're telling me! There's girls, for instance, although of course being a redhead you haven't got much of a hope with them. But just suppose for instance that you were out with a girl, you wouldn't want to spend the whole time telling her about the Departments of France.'

Copper-nob agreed that this was the case. He might, had he chosen, have argued that some degree of education may be helpful even in dealing with girls. He might have divulged that on holidays he quite often went and played in the woods with Marie Blot, who was one of the brightest pupils on the girls' side, and that she liked hearing him recite poems by Victor Hugo and other poets that they had learnt in class. Such matters, however, were not for the dull ears of Lanky Jars.

But that morning on their way to school, losing all patience with Jars's swanking, he had abandoned his customary re-

ticence and blurted out these confidences in self-defence. As an argument the revelation had failed. Jars had merely grinned and said condescendingly:

'There you are, you see. You're top in class and you can do compound interest and you know half the dates in the history book, but you still don't know what women are for.'

Copper-nob flushed, cut to the quick at being credited with so much ignorance. He said tersely.

'I know they're for having babies, if that's what you mean.'

'Well, that's something,' conceded Jars. 'But it's lucky I'm here to tell you about things because you'd never get it out of Old Monge. Do you know what men are for?'

'That – that's got nothing to do with it,' said Copper-nob.

'What do you mean, it's got nothing to do with it?'

'Well, I mean, men – they're men, that's all.'

'That's just what I thought – you don't know! It's only natural, you being a redhead. Redheads aren't like other people.'

There were still ten minutes to go before school began. Lanky Jars decided to sacrifice a game of marbles to the instruction of Copper-nob and proceeded to demonstrate to him that there can be no effect without a cause. His account of the matter was perfectly sound, and Copper-nob was amazed. The whole thing was extraordinary and it opened up the most startling perspectives.

'You mean, even old Monge . . . ?'

'Well, of course,' said Lanky Jars. 'He's married, isn't he? Naturally he doesn't go round talking about it.'

Time was now getting on, and the school building, enclosed by its hedge, was still two hundred yards away.

'The one who gets there last is a silly idiot!' cried Lanky Jars.

Copper-nob started to run for all he was worth. It was a thing that had happened before. He always fell for the chal-

lenge and invariably lost, because Lanky Jars had such long legs. He knew quite well that winning races had nothing to do with intellectual superiority, and he could easily have proved this to Jars. It wasn't that he lacked arguments. But when he came in five or six yards behind, as normally happened, he made it a matter of pride to say nothing. He accepted the verdict of trial by ordeal without too much preening himself on the things he might have said.

That morning, however, either because Lanky Jars ran more sluggishly than usual, or because he himself managed to go a bit faster, they came in neck and neck. The end of the race had been watched with a close interest by the other boys, and as they rounded the hedge there were shouts of:

'Go it, Copper-nob, keep it up! Copper-nob's winning! He's won!'

The truth was that they touched the big acacia at the far end of the playground at the same instant; but the instinct of popular enthusiasm is always on the side of the unexpected, and glory goes to him who beats the form-book. Copper-nob was in the truest sense the winner, and his victory was greeted with cheers.

Lanky Jars was furious. In a momentary lull he said:

'I gave him at least ten yards start, and if I'd wanted to I – '

But no one was listening. Copper-nob, glowing with triumph, his tangled red hair waving on his head as though it had indeed burst into flames, took a deep breath of the sparkling morning air and retorted:

'Well, considering all the silly rot you've been telling me it's no wonder you lost!'

There were murmurs of approval, although none of the others knew what the rot was. Lanky Jars, still panting, glanced sidelong at his vanquisher, thinking vengeful thoughts.

Monsieur Monge appeared in the school doorway and beckoned them in. They sat in the classroom in order of merit,

the bright boys nearest the master's desk. Lanky Jars was at the back among the dullards, whereas Copper-nob was in the front row.

When they were all seated Monsieur Monge called the roll and then said to Copper-nob:

'Pierre Chauvet, will you please collect the exercise books with last night's essay and lay them, open at the right place, on my desk.'

The task of collecting the exercise-books was a privilege reserved for the good pupils. It often fell to Copper-nob, who took great pride in it. But the consciousness of rectitude did not prevent him from dealing charitably with his fellows. If one of them had not done his homework he would make a sign and Copper-nob would pass on without collecting his book, cleverly contriving not to attract the master's notice.

When he came to the back row that morning he saw at once from his expression that this was the case with Lanky Jars. Nobly coming to the rescue of his enemy, he passed him over. The stratagem succeeded as usual. He put the pile of books on the desk, and when Monsieur Monge asked if he had collected them all he said firmly:

'Yes, sir, they're all there.'

Whereupon Lanky Jars rose in his seat and announced in a clear voice:

'Please, sir, mine isn't there. I haven't done my essay.'

An indignant murmur went up from the class at this act of betrayal. Monsieur Monge adjusted his glasses and sat for a moment pondering. That Lanky Jars should have defaulted caused him no great surprise, but he was extremely annoyed with Copper-nob.

'Pierre Chauvet,' he said, 'stand up. You deliberately lied to me, and you have shown that you are not to be trusted. In future you will not collect the exercise books.'

Copper-nob started to protest, his cheeks flushing with anger, but the master silenced him with a gesture and said to Lanky Jars:

'Thank you, Léon Jars, for having told me the truth. In the circumstances I shall not punish you. You see, it always pays to be honest. But perhaps you will tell me why you haven't done your essay?'

'We were busy on the farm, sir. We killed a pig.'

'You seem to kill a great many pigs on your farm,' said Monsieur Monge. 'Well, even if you couldn't do your essay I hope you found time to prepare your history. Let us hear what you can tell us about the retreat from Moscow.'

Lanky Jars's notions of history were decidedly hazy. He remarked that Napoleon was a great man, but this turned out to be no more than a general impression, and being invited to substantiate it with facts he was unable to do so. Monsieur Monge, after ordering him to copy out the chapter, delivered a sombre lecture in which he predicted for him the blackest of futures, haunted by remorse for his ill-spent youth. Sundered from his fellow-men by his own ignorance and folly, he would listen enviously to the conversation of educated persons, bitterly regretting his failure to reap the rich harvest placed at his disposal by an enlightened government. Lanky Jars sat listening with folded arms and a placid expression untroubled by any secret misgivings.

Monsieur Monge shrugged his shoulders in discouragement and turned to the other members of the class, whose answers were not much more satisfactory. They all knew that there had been a war between France and Russia (in French history everybody spent all their time at war, except a few eccentrics like Henri III, who played cup-and-ball, and Louis XV, who made coffee) and even that it had snowed a great deal during the Russian campaign; but the possession of these data had led

them to no very clear conclusions. Grieved that they should have been so little impressed with the importance of the retreat from Moscow, Monsieur Monge meted out a collective punishment. All those who had not at least acquainted themselves with the salient facts were to march round the playground during break.

Meanwhile Copper-nob, still shaken with anger at the perfidy of Lanky Jars, his heart heavily beating, was in a state of such agitation that he could not sit still. Thinking that the retreat from Moscow was now disposed of he put up his hand and snapped his fingers, repeating several times:

'Please, sir, can I go out?'

Monsieur Monge looked at him in surprise, almost in distress. Experience had taught him that it was always the blockheads who wanted to go out in the middle of class, whereas the good boys had no difficulty in controlling their needs until the period was over. Wondering at Copper-nob's impatience, he concluded that his star pupil, who was evidently going to pieces, simply wanted to dodge the subject of the Russian campaign. He gave permission with a disapproving nod, but as he did so a voice was raised at the back of the room. Léon Jars was complaining that he had asked before Pierre Chauvet. Uncertain of the truth, and not wishing to do injustice, Monsieur Monge said:

'Well, you'd better both go, but mind you don't take too long.'

Both boys jumped to their feet and made a dash for the door. There was a scuffle in the doorway. Lanky Jars won and was first out, while the class watched with breathless interest. Monsieur Monge attempted to call them back, to give them a lesson in manners, but no attention was paid to him, so he seized upon the deplorable episode to announce that henceforth no boy would be allowed to go to the lavatory during class.

As they crossed the playground Copper-nob turned and vented his fury on Lanky Jars.

'There's no one else in the whole class who'd play a dirty trick like that,' he said, and he went on to call him a dirty cheat and a louse and a stinker and yellow to the core.

The final insult stung Lanky Jars, who had received the rest with an air of cynical calm.

'Yellow, am I? You say that again, or else it proves you are.'

Knowing that he was much the weaker Copper-nob refrained from doing so, gritting his teeth, and Lanky Jars grinned in insufferable triumph.

They went together into the narrow, foetid shed and stood side by side with sidelong glances of defiance. After a moment of silence Lanky Jars said in a jeering voice:

'I piss higher than you do.'

It was the plain truth. His superiority in this respect was undeniable. But the way he swanked about it was beyond everything. Copper-nob shrugged his shoulders and answered coldly:

'So what? It's only because you're two years older than me.'

'That doesn't make any difference. For pissing high it doesn't matter what age you are. And the proof is that I can piss as high as my brother, who's twenty-one and just done his military service.'

It was a palpable lie; it couldn't be true; and Copper-nob said scornfully:

'That's what you say. I bet your brother wasn't trying. Because I'll tell you something and everybody knows it's true, the older you are the higher you piss. That's something you can't get away from.'

He turned to leave, but Lanky Jars stood blocking the doorway.

'You say it all depends on how old you are?'

'Yes, I do.'

'So at that rate a man of sixty pisses as high as a house? Or take old Monge, for instance. Why doesn't he piss clean over the wall?'

Copper-nob searched for an adequate reply to this, but the severe logic of Lanky Jars's position was not easily assailable. The proof by *reductio ad absurdum* left him silenced. It seemed to him that arithmetic had betrayed him, that it was no longer in touch with reality. Afflicted in a deep-rooted sense of values, he began to question the power of the intellect.

'You see?' jeered Lanky Jars. And he added: 'Redheads can't ever piss high. Everybody knows that.'

Then he ran back to the classroom. Copper-nob followed him slowly and went and sat down at the foot of the acacia, where he had won the race so short a time before. He sat staring in disgust at the classroom windows, feeling that all the teaching of Monsieur Monge had suddenly vanished in a mist.

Because what was the use of learning vulgar fractions and grammar and all the other difficult things they expected you to know? What good did it do to be top in mental arithmetic and geography if it didn't help you to get the better of a dirty liar like Lanky Jars? There was no sense in working hard and thinking that you were getting to know and understand things if you had to see truth mocked and overthrown by logic and couldn't find an answer. Finally Copper-nob got up, burning with resentment and dragged his feet slowly to the door. Monsieur Monge greeted him sternly:

'Well, Pierre Chauvet, and did you ask to go out so as to spend the morning sitting under a tree?'

Copper-nob went back to his place without even bothering to say that he had a headache, which would have been the obvious answer. His silence further exasperated Monsieur Monge, who

resorted to a tone of acid sarcasm, calling the rest of the class to witness.

'No doubt Monsieur Chauvet hoped that by staying away long enough he would avoid being called upon to favour us with his views on the retreat from Moscow. . . .'

The class laughed sycophantically, especially Lanky Jars, and Copper-nob sat sullenly with his arms crossed on the table, despising this servile mirth. A gloomy anger whitened his face, causing the freckles to stand out more sharply on the milky skin.

'Nevertheless,' said Monsieur Monge, 'we will now return to the retreat from Moscow. We are all ears, Pierre Chauvet. Kindly stand up so that we can have a good view of you.'

Copper-nob rose and without looking at him began:

'Napoleon entered Moscow on the 14th of September, 1812 . . .'

He went on to tell of the fire, the Cossacks, the crossing of the Beresina, the snow, the frostbite, the horse-flesh – he omitted nothing. But the recital was delivered in a colourless voice, without warmth. Monsieur Monge had often praised the interest he showed in his subjects, but today there was none. He looked tired, and as he spoke he gazed abstractedly out at the acacia framed in the window.

'The soldiers were all mixed up with the officers and nobody obeyed orders. All the same, there were generals like Marshal Victor and Marshal Ney . . .'

And here he broke off. Suddenly a flush rose on his cheeks. Thrusting out his chest he turned to face the teacher.

'There was Marshal Ney. He didn't run away. He carried a musket and was braver than anyone. That's why Napoleon called him the bravest of the brave. Marshal Ney fought under the Revolution. He was born at Sarrelouis and he had red hair. . . .'

Copper-nob turned towards the class and repeated in ringing tones:

'He had red hair!'

The boys nudged one another and chuckled discreetly. Even Monsieur Monge could not repress a smile. Copper-nob threw back his flaming head as though he were defying an entire regiment of Cossacks, and looking straight at Lanky Jars he cried:

'He had red hair, and he could piss higher than anyone in the whole of the Grande Armée!'

A Roll of Daughters

(The story of a girl who could not be confined in a fairy-tale.)

NOËL TOURNEBISE had so many marriageable daughters and so little memory that he could not recall their names and had to keep a list in his pocket. At four o'clock on summer mornings, and five in winter, when all the family was assembled in the farm kitchen and the coffee was steaming in the bowls, Noël would adjust his glasses and grumble as he got out his list:

'There's a fine lot of noise going on for a day like any other day. I ask you, is it a reasonable way to behave, the whole lot of you to be laughing and singing at the top of your voices when it's the time it is already? But that's girls all over. I said it often enough to the wife, in the days when she was still getting about with her broom. "Why do you always have to give me daughters to burst my eardrums", I said, "making the house like a nest of screeching magpies? However many there may be, I'd change the lot for a single boy." Yes, that's what I used to say to the wife.'

And while he was talking in this fashion, Noël would be laughing under his breath or even aloud with his eyes twinkling behind his glasses, because he rejoiced to have so many daughters. When he was at work in the fields he had only to glance

out over the plain to see a dozen at any time, some on their way to wash clothes, some going to confession or wherever it might be, and others binding sheaves or just dawdling in the shade of an apple tree ('If only I could remember all your names!' he thought). Sometimes he would pass a girl on the road who was really his neighbour's daughter and he'd mistake her for one of his own. He said to himself that he had so many that he didn't know where to put them all, the great laughing wenches, getting up to the Lord knew what when he wasn't there behind them to threaten them with a good slap.

Meanwhile the girls crowding the kitchen, seeing their father put on his glasses, would swallow their coffee in haste and for the time being stop laughing and squabbling and comparing their waists and the roundness of their calves (it would be too much to say that they were all pretty, but in the matter of legs there was not one who had reason to complain). Noël would unfold his list and go to the window to see better.

'Marie-Jeanne, 1902!' he would call. 'Are you there, Marie-Jeanne? You'll go to the Champ-Rouge to hoe the potatoes. Alphonsine, 1900, the Champ-Rouge as well, and Lucienne, '97 . . . Louise, 1908 and Roberte, 1909, you'll take the donkey and go to the mill to fetch those two sacks of bran. . . . Christine and Eugénie, 1915, you'll mind the cows. . . . The following will come with me to the lucerne field – Barbe, '90, Guillaumette, '91, and Marie-Anne, '95. . . . Véronique, 1917, will look after the geese. I'm sorry for her, a big girl of sixteen, but that's the best job I can find for her at the moment. As for the rest of you, you'll just have to find things to do in the woods or the garden or the house. If I had to plan the day's work for every single one of you there'd be no end to it.'

Nevertheless he never failed to address each one by her name, and before leaving the farmhouse he would warn them against idling for even so little as a quarter of an hour, and still

more against letting themselves be caught by any prowling snatcher of virginities, because otherwise his little finger would tell him of it. And at this the girls would nudge one another and wink, thinking to themselves that in this matter of virginities such a thing was no more to be found in that house than snow in high summer. The thing was so well known that the Tournebise girls never married and were a wicked snare to the men for ten miles around, and a terror to all God-fearing wives. Barbe, '90, although she was going on for forty-four and had a bottom like two sacks of flour, was worse than any of her sisters, and the curé said that never in all his years as a curé had he known a hussy so outrageous as that infernal Barbe; so much so that when he saw her coming towards him with her hips swaying and her bosom going before her he was thankful for the hindrance of his cassock and even then had to repeat two or three prayers, paying attention to what he said. Lead us not into temptation. And what enraged him more than anything was to know that by her lamentable example the creature had led all her sisters into sin, from Guillaumette, '91, to Véronique, 1917, who burned with longings when she was barely sixteen. On the eve of feast days when the whole lot of them queued up at the confessional he went hot and cold at the thought of the abominations he was about to hear from their lips. But more than all the others put together was he terrified of Barbe, whose sins were so resounding and disorderly in their nature that the confessional was almost burst asunder by the impact, bounced, shaken and turned upside down.

'Father, you may be sure that I am truly repentant. I'd taken off my chemise, you see, to look for a flea that started just here, where I'm pointing, and it went down and down – '

'All right,' growled the curé. 'Get on with it.'

'Yes, father. Well, and then Noré Coutensot came along, and where do you think he found it?'

Almost daily the curé went to Noël Tournebise to complain about the disgraceful conduct of one or other of his daughters, but most often about Barbe.

'Really, Noël, I don't know why you don't keep those girls in better order. I've just heard that last Saturday Barbe was at it again, setting half the parish in an uproar.'

'Barbe?' said her father. 'Let me just make a mark on my list to remind me. Don't worry, she shall have a sound hiding.'

And Noël would search his pockets, but at moments such as these he could never find his list.

'I know exactly what it is,' growled the curé. 'You condone the offence.'

'Nothing of the kind, Monsieur le Curé. She shall be punished, I promise you. Let me see – it was Guillaumette you said?'

'No, it was not. Still, make it Guillaumette if you'd rather. There'll soon be precious little to choose between them, except that Barbe is the one who takes the lead.'

Noël's list was in alphabetical order and contained all the information a father needs. A glance along the line told him both Christian name and date of birth. It was an excellent list, admirably written, with capital letters that he could read without glasses. But it was old and he made use of it at least twice a day, so that, although it had been copied on to stout paper, it was coming apart at the creases. There were also accidents to be reckoned with.

One such accident had occurred during the first year of its use, one morning when Noël had got the list out of his pocket as usual. The bottom of the sheet had got caught between the blade and handle of his clasp-knife and had been torn off. The strip had torn right across, leaving no gap, and Noël had never noticed that a name was lacking. For a time, when he called the roll of his daughters, he had a slight sensation at the end of

something still remaining on the tip of his tongue, but that was all.

The one whose name was no longer called became lost among her sisters and no longer counted. Work and pleasure were shared so evenly between them that no one needed her, and she shrank into the shadowy region of minor habits that the mind does not precisely formulate. She was no more than a unit, an undefined cypher in a number that was itself uncertain. Her name had gone astray in her father's pocket, and no doubt in mid-morning, when he opened his knife to cut his loaf of bread, it had been borne off on the breeze blowing over the plain, between the woods and the stream. No one heard it mentioned again, and it was as though it had never been. There was simply a familiar shadow in the house which went unnoticed, concerning itself like all the others with the daily business of the household and the farm. One of the sisters might say casually, 'The soup-pot needs putting on the fire' or 'Someone should go and cut some leeks'; and almost at once the pot would be on the fire and the leeks would be cut. About the house cupboards were tidied, bodices mended, buttons sewn on, often without anyone noticing. But it sometimes happened that some task went unperformed although the wish had been expressed, so that Guillaumette or Véronique or Marie-Thérèse had to do it themselves. And then they would glance covertly about them, and sensing the lack of a friendly presence would turn pale with superstitious awe; and that evening they would make a cake or hastily knit a pair of stockings and put them on the top shelf of a cupboard that was never opened except on these occasions.

When the sisters quarrelled and were on the point of coming to blows (and there were many sources of discord between them, as many, or perhaps a few more, as there were men in the district) they sometimes heard a sound like a sob borne on the air of the house, and then they would lower their upraised arms

and look ashamed, while a murmur of contrition rose from their lips. But at other times when they were laughing aloud with a flame darting in their eyes, while they told one another of their latest escapade, with Marie Coutensot's husband or one of the four Pont brothers, on these occasions it was not a sob that they heard, but only a sigh.

After supper on summer evenings Noël Tournebise would sit out of doors smoking caporal in a cherrywood pipe, and there would be young men thronging the fields and as many murmurs under the stars as there were daughters on his list, or rather, twice as many.

'The crickets are singing prettily,' Noël would say to his pipe.

When really it was just the opposite, and the song of the crickets, like that of the toads, the bullfrogs and the nightingales, was stifled in their throats by the sound of so many couples embraced in the cool shade of the evening. Voices would be raised in question and answer, Guillaumette and Frédéric, Marie-Louise and Léonard, so that it melted the heart to hear them. Voices in the dew of the meadows, now one and now another, and sometimes all together. As many young men as there were Tournebise girls. Together they made one voice that said nothing very much but was not hard to understand. And when one might suppose that the song was over there would still be the voice of Barbe, sounding like a roll of thunder. The crickets, the toads, the bullfrogs and the nightingales considered that Noël's daughters were decidedly free in their behaviour, and they looked the other way. They looked at a shadow moving between two hedges, along the lane that led to the woods. It was a graceful shadow, and except that it was solitary one might well have mistaken it for one of the Tournebise girls, Marinette perhaps, or Véronique.

At the place where the lane emerged from between its hedges

the shadow paused on the plain, and having shaken off her clothes became a white, naked figure gleaming in the summer night. She rubbed her body and her limbs with dew, pausing to caress the smooth curve of her belly and the roundness of her hip; and with both hands she offered a bright breast to the moon, uttering a complaint in a voice smaller than that of the crickets. She said it was shameful that, firm and white though it was, the breast no longer counted. How soft it was in her hands, and better still in a boy's hands, if only it had counted as a breast. And all the rest which now counted for nothing, it was a great shame. She said that breasts were desolate unless they could be given to a man, and the rest too. A white, heavy mist rolled over the meadows covering her to mid-thigh, but it was a cold embrace. The naked form put on its shadowy garments and turned back whence it had come, along the lane between the hedges.

One evening when Noël with Barbe was returning from work in the fields they saw the curé, who came to them raising his arms in the air and crying that he had witnesses to prove that it was Barbe who had done him the evil turn of debauching two of his choir-boys.

'I hope you're proud of yourselves, the two of you! There's a fine achievement indeed!'

Barbe said that it was quite untrue, and that in any case she no longer took the smallest interest in men. Noël wagged his head and said:

'You see? She says it isn't true.'

'You're as much to blame as she is. When I think of those two unhappy youngsters, as innocent as the angels in Heaven – '

'Innocent, indeed! A fine lot you know about it!'

'Silence, you scandalous trollop! Two children to whom nothing would have happened if they had not had the misfortune to encounter a shameless slut . . .'

Barbe made a movement, and a flush of anger rose on her cheeks. But the curé repeated his words, because he was setting a trap for her.

'Yes, a shameless slut, and forty-four years old, upon my soul! Two harmless little boys set upon by a middle-aged jezebel – '

'Harmless!' cried Barbe, who could bear no more. 'As though they weren't the ones who started it!'

'You see, she's admitted it!' said the curé in triumph.

With a sigh Noël got out his list and made a cross against the name of Barbe, which came second, after that of Alphonsine.

'I'll see what I can do,' he said.

The next morning Noël got on his donkey and rode off in search of a husband for his eldest daughter. He was away three days and then returned with a stranger, a man with eyes of a very gentle blue. Barbe came near to flinging herself upon him, but something in the way he looked at her caused her to draw back. The man took his place in the household without apparent embarrassment at finding himself surrounded by so many girls. He went out into the fields and did as much work as four sisters put together. In the morning Noël unfolded his list and called out his name with those of his daughters.

'Man, you will go with Barbe and put the drags over the Trois-Bouts field.'

He was always sent to work in company with Barbe, and everyone supposed that it would not be long before they got married. All that was to be feared was that Barbe would ruin everything with her impatience. The Tournebise girls watched a little enviously as the couple set out for the fields, and never missed a chance of spying on them. But they saw nothing to encourage the hope of an early marriage. The man worked without raising his eyes, seeming not even to be aware of the fact that he had a woman at his side. At the end of a month

Barbe declared that she had given up the thought of marriage, and the sisters began to pursue the man, each on her own account. All had fallen in love with him, and it seemed at first that this grand passion would influence their conduct for the better. But, alas, Barbe, having by great striving remained virtuous for a month, now broke out to such effect that in less than a week she had plunged a dozen virtuous wives into despair, without counting fiancées and the mothers of families. The curé was on the verge of a breakdown, exhausted with the effort of preaching resignation to so many victims. And, as always happened, Barbe's evil example was the undoing of her sisters, who again plunged into sin. They said that the presence of a man in the house warmed their blood, and this seemed not impossible, considering the number of their lovers.

The man maintained an extreme reserve, but in the house, at mealtimes, his manner was strange. While all the girls devoured him with their eyes he sat gazing into space with an attentive air, as though he could really see something which escaped the rest of them. He was seen to smile and turn his head, to make a gesture and pause with his spoon suspended, as though awaiting a gesture in reply. When one of the sisters spoke to him he answered absently, as though he were listening to other words. Sometimes he seemed to be speaking to himself, but in a murmur so soft that it was difficult to catch anything of what he said.

'Man,' Noël said to him one day, 'you are not very kind to my daughters.'

'Good girls, all of them,' said the man. 'I am fond of them all.'

'Don't you want to marry one of them, this year or next?'

'Yes, indeed I do.'

'Then tell me which one, so that I can make a mark on my list.'

The man laughed and said:

'There is no way of telling you her name – no way at all. . . .'

When the man had been two months with them he seemed to lose his fondness for work. In the morning he always found some pretext for being the last to leave for the fields, and in the evening he was always the first to return. They would find him seated in the kitchen, laughing in exultation. At length, when Noël called the roll one morning, they found that he was no longer there, and they never heard of him again. From that day on, when Josephine or Guillaumette said that it was time to put the soup-pot on the fire, they could no longer expect the thing to happen of its own accord. As they went about their daily tasks the girls wondered what it was that the man had taken with him, that now was missing from the house.

About a year after these events another strip got torn from Noël's list, this time from the top, and Alphonsine, whose name was immediately above that of Barbe, was borne off on the breeze. So there was another daughter who no longer counted, another naked form lamenting to the crickets in the summer evenings. Barbe was now going on for forty-five, and it was a thing to wonder at that she had put on a dozen pounds while bringing to destruction as many men. Her ardours grew with advancing age, and the curé would no longer admit her to the confessional, preferring to absolve her without listening. And Barbe's sisters, with less imposing means, followed no less evil courses. The whole region was falling into decay, as though ravaged by some natural disaster, for the men had scarcely strength to bring in the harvest, and beasts and humans alike grew thinner in a way that was pitiful to behold. Only Noël's crops and cattle flourished, and the curé accused him of having deliberately brought about this state of things.

'It is all on account of the abominable Barbe, and you know

it perfectly well. After that business of the choir-boys you can no longer pretend – '

'I tried to marry her off,' said Noël, 'but it didn't work.'

'Well, you'll have to find her another husband, and let's hope he'll take her a long way from here.'

As a result of the curé's nagging Noël set out once again on his donkey to find a husband for his eldest daughter. This time he was away five days, and he returned with a young man so shy and pink that Barbe wanted to eat him. Things did not turn out in quite the same way with this one as with his predecessor. On the day of his arrival, by the time they had come to the cheese at the end of their evening meal, the young man was reduced to such confusion by the gaze of so many shameless eyes that he made excuses and left the room. He went out into the yard and, hearing the distant song of the crickets in the meadows, felt that he would like to hear it more closely. Passing between the two hedges he saw a shadow going before him down the lane, and he followed it until it became a naked form out on the open plain. Never had he imagined such a wonder of nakedness. Hearing her complain of the loneliness of her breasts he ran to tell her that he would do his best for her, and he was never again seen on the farm.

Hot-eyed and with clenched hands, Barbe waited for him until after midnight, but seeing that he did not return, that he had fled like the other, she went to bed and sought in vain to sleep, devoured as she was by all the demons of concupiscence. It seemed to her that there would never be enough men on earth to appease her torment, and the truth is that she wanted a man who would be a little new to her. That is how she came to conceive a most lamentable design.

On the following morning the curé was strolling in his garden, reading his breviary, when, as he turned a corner, he came almost on top of Barbe, who was pulling up her stocking

while she gazed at him with a light of perversity in her eyes. He was overtaken with giddiness and felt his mouth go dry. The scent of woman's flesh, mingling with that of the flowers, robbed him of the power to pray and he thought that he was doomed. What was most abominable, but also alluring, was that the air around Barbe quivered as it does above a blazing fire. In a vibrant and ravening voice Barbe whispered to him things which it would take him five years to unlearn. But when he was on the very verge of succumbing, chance willed it that his servant called to him from the house, asking him to come and taste the new supply of communion wine that had just been delivered. He crossed the garden at a run, sprang on to his bicycle and pedalled to the field where Noël was working, almost without drawing breath.

'You must find her a husband instantly!' he shouted. 'Instantly!'

'Which one do you mean, Monsieur le Curé?'

'Barbe, of course!'

Noël got out his sheet of paper and saw that opposite the name of Barbe, which now stood at the head of the list, above that of Charlotte, he had already put two crosses.

'I'll remember,' he promised. 'As soon as we've finished the hay – '

'No, you must start today, this very minute. I'm coming with you.'

Noël protested, but the curé pressed him so strongly that he went and got his donkey. It took them no more than a day to find a man. He was a gendarme on leave who stood six foot two in his socks and ate enough for three. He thought Barbe a handy-looking wench, and made no bones about saying so. And Barbe, for her part, thought him a very fine fellow with his big black moustache and his cavalryman's bearing. By the evening of the day of his arrival she was so firmly resolved to marry him

that twelve of her sisters had to mount guard over her to ensure that she did not at once offer that which the bridegroom is accustomed to look for after the ceremony. The gendarme plucked at his moustache and rolled his eyes, and it was clear that he was deeply stirred.

In the morning as they sat drinking their coffee, and after the gendarme had entered the kitchen, Noël unfolded his paper. The name at the head of the list was that of Charlotte, and he hesitated for an instant before reading it out, as though he had had something else on the tip of his tongue. But he uttered it notwithstanding, and went on to call the names of Claudine, Clémentine, Dorothée, until he reached that of Véronique, who came last. And when he had completed the roll-call a sort of sigh was heard in the house. It sounded a good deal like the bellows in a smithy, but it was the sigh of a ghost, and the gendarme, who had had little experience of ghosts, did not hear it at all.

'Someone ought to put a saucepan on the fire,' said Guillaumette.

Scarcely had she spoken the words than there was the saucepan, on the stove, and no one paid any attention to the circumstance. Noël was in the meantime asking the gendarme if he had slept well and if he was as much in love as ever.

'But will you please remind me of the name of the one you have chosen?'

This the gendarme was unable to do, for very good reasons. He examined all the sisters with care, and after hesitating between Lucienne and Marie-Louise finally pointed at Guillaumette. At this a great bellow of indignation resounded through the kitchen.

'Pardon me!' cried a voice. 'I should like to remind you that I'm here!'

'Who's that talking so loud?' asked Noël looking about him.

He received no answer and said to the gendarme:

'I thought I recognised . . . But no, it was nothing. It doesn't count.'

'It doesn't count, indeed?' thundered the voice. 'I ask you, Gendarme, does none of this count?'

Beneath the clasping hands of the ecstatic gendarme the Tournebise family saw a shadow become substance. It was a richly curved and ample figure, and all about it the air quivered as over a blazing fire.

'How solid it is,' murmured the gendarme, 'and how warm to the touch!'

'Well, upon my soul!'

Noël was greatly astonished, being sure that he recognised one of his daughters. He called the roll again, but without being able to put a name to that familiar face, and then he began to look suspiciously at his list. Finally, as he got his watch out of his pocket, he found a scrap of paper caught in the case.

'Barbe, '90!' he cried, shedding tears of joy.

The wedding of Barbe Tournebise was both splendid and dramatic. She chose to invite all the men who owed her a moment of forgetfulness, and the church was not big enough to hold as many as half of them. On the evening of their marriage the gendarme received news that he had been appointed to a post of honour in one of the African colonies, where his wife's beauty received the homage that was its due.

Noël had three copies of his list made on parchment, and he never again mislaid a name. After Barbe's departure the Tournebise girls became so well-conducted that the curé held them up as an example to the other ladies of his parish. And since virtue is the most beautiful of all adornments they had no trouble in finding husbands.

Rue de l'Évangile

In the La Chapelle district of Paris there lived a poor Arab called Abdel for short, and also called 'l'Arbi' or 'Biquemuche' or even 'Bique à poux', that is to say, 'Flea-ridden goat' or 'Fleabag', because he had fleas.

The northern part of the La Chapelle quarter is enclosed within bare walls concealing factories, goods stations, railway lines, gasometers, grimy trains and wandering locomotives. The smoke of the eastern and northern railway systems, mingling with that of the factories, blackens apartment houses built with an eye to economy, and the sparsely frequented streets have the aspect of a drab corner of the provinces surrounded by a desert of rust and coal. It is, in short, a literary landscape where the sensitive pedestrian, hearing the trains whistle in the murk, may find himself murmuring a prayer to God that life shall not last unduly long.

In the Rue des Roses, at the end of a blind alley separating two black and dingy houses, Abdel lived on a flight of three damp stone steps leading to a door in a wall, sheltered by a screen of rotting wood. Neighbours returning home late at night sometimes went to the end of the alleyway, and by the flame of a cigarette-lighter inspected him as he lay asleep wrapped in the old military cape that was his day- and night-time garment. Those more inspired prodded him with their

foot, saying, 'Wah, wah, shoo shoo', perhaps with a friendly notion of bringing themselves within his comprehension. He replied with the little, hoarse, shrill cry that seems to form the basis of the Arab tongue and they went away content.

In the morning, at the first sound of dirty water splashing over the cobbles of the alley, Abdel arose, took off his cape and put it on again. Having thus completed his toilet he strolled along the Rue des Roses looking for what life might bring. The early housewives, hurrying to get their shopping done before they went to the factory, gazed at him with disfavour and were not slow to pass unkind remarks. After gleaning a few edible fragments from the dustbins he was accustomed to make a long pause outside the Café du Destin, where he watched the men breakfasting at the counter on coffee or a glass of white wine. The customers would wag their heads in his direction saying to one another, 'There's the Arab again,' astonished and slightly put out to find that he was still alive when so many honest men, of value to their families and the Republic, daily departed this world. Sometimes M. Alceste, the proprietor of the Destin, would tap on the window with a coin, calling upon him to enter. 'I'll show you something you wouldn't believe,' he would say to the customers. He would fill a large cup with vinegar, and holding up a franc would complete the bargain with Abdel by nodding his head. Abdel never hesitated, but swallowed the vinegar at a gulp. 'Any decent man would die of it,' the *patron* would say after the onlookers had exclaimed in amazement, and he nearly always added, 'It's interesting from a scientific point of view.' Mme Alceste, his wife, who took no interest in scientific phenomena, and saw nothing in the performance but a waste of money and vinegar, would stand aloof behind the counter, shrugging her shoulders. She was a short, plump woman, still young, with a large bosom thrusting very low beneath a corsage of brightly coloured silk. A shade of

dark moustache lent her puffy face a hint of impassioned mystery.

On the days when he was not invited to drink vinegar Abdel had another chance of being admitted to the Destin. During the slack period after the factory workers had left his counter, M. Alceste, while sweeping the floor, was sometimes visited by an oppressive sense of the vanity of human affairs and, glancing through the window, would see the world as an arid pavement on which Abdel constituted an interesting blot. He would open the door and say, 'Arab, bring in your fleas.' Mme Alceste, seated at the far end of the room, would again shrug her shoulders, but without taking her nose out of her film-magazine or ceasing to dream that she was Mae West or, on her more sanguine days, Greta Garbo. Leaning on his broom-handle her husband would gaze at Abdel as he drank a cup of luke-warm coffee, and fall into spoken meditation.

'When you come to think of it,' he would say, 'men don't amount to much. Take yourself, for instance. What are you? Muck, that's all you are. Where do you come from? God knows. What use are you to anyone? I was having a talk with the barber the other day and what we both said was that the Government oughtn't to allow riff-raff like you into the country, and still less into a town like Paris, which is the heart of France. Not that I've anything against foreigners, generally speaking, but you've got to draw the line somewhere. And suppose you were to disappear one day, shot or something – who'd even know about it? No one. Maybe I'd happen to remark to Mme Alceste, "It's a funny thing, we haven't seen that Arab around lately, the one that drinks vinegar." And that's all. In a fortnight I'd have forgotten all about you. So that proves you're less than nothing.'

While these remarks were being addressed to him, Abdel would stand gazing at Mme Alceste with eyes alight with

passion, sorry that he had no chance to rape her, because, being humble and modest, the thought that he might achieve anything by making up to her never entered his head. At night, on his three damp steps, he often dreamed of her as of a voluptuous pillow, warming and softening his couch of stone, and his nearest neighbours would sometimes hear a soft murmur issue from his sleep. But his happiest dreams did not prompt him to ask more of life, and in those moments when he devoured Mme Alceste with his eyes he never expected her to give him a glance in return. Only he was a little jealous of the fabulous figures he sometimes glimpsed on the pages of her film magazine, which seemed to transport the *patronne* to a sphere even more remote from him than that of the Café du Destin.

Upon leaving the café Abdel was in the habit of going to the little Place Hébert, where he made another extensive pause. From the pavement at the corner of the Rue des Roses he would stand looking over the crossroads towards a street which was often completely deserted, the Rue de l'Évangile, which ran between tall, blank walls screening the railway cutting on the right and, on the left, the vast gasometer area, of which the tall and monstrous containers seemed to overshadow and crush the roadway. This long, enclosed street, without houses or pedestrians, filled Abdel with alarm and curiosity. On several occasions he had started to go along it, but, overtaken with panic and feeling the world slip away from him, he had had to turn back. About a hundred yards from the Place Hébert it veered a little to the right, seeming to continue endlessly between its unbroken walls until it became lost within itself. In the grey and smoky light of the morning it was like a street in abstract, like the starting-place of a frowning infinity or of a desolate passageway leading to unattainable heavens. Abdel concluded that for practical purposes it led nowhere, and whenever he saw a lorry emerge from it on to the Place Hébert he wished he

knew enough of the language to be able to stop the driver and ask him, 'Where have you come from?'

Throughout the day, as he strayed about the quarter, Abdel dreamed of the *patronne* of the Café du Destin and the emptiness of the Rue de l'Évangile. During the mornings in the market in the Rue Guadeloupe, where he kept a look-out for anything edible, and for purses, and during the afternoons on the benches of the Boulevard de la Chapelle, where by the light of the shop-windows he watched the passing of ten-franc trollops with a tiring sense of having penetrated into a forbidden garden, the same pictures returned to haunt him; and at night, as he fell asleep, he seemed to see the tightly encased figure of Mme Alceste melting into the shadows of an empty and perilous street.

* * *

On a certain Sunday morning, while her husband swept the floor of the Café du Destin, Mme Alceste sat reading the story of a particularly stirring film. The hero was a young man of striking good looks, enlisted in the Foreign Legion, who bore a romantic design tattooed on his chest. Although disapproved of by his platoon-sergeant, he fought like a lion in battle and at other times had a light of wistful yearning in his eyes which was deeply moving to members of the other sex. The wife of a world-famous naturalist, who had come to Africa to study the habits of the locust, fell in love with the humble soldier and their passion was consummated in the scented evenings. Finally the young man died a heroic death in the desert after saving the naturalist's life, and the lady climbed on to the roof of a Moorish house to sing a heart-rending lament to the stars. The title of the film was, 'My Legionary'. Mme Alceste, damp-eyed, her bosom heaving with love and heroism, did not hear her husband call to Abdel through the half-open door. She was rapt in

contemplation of the picture of the hero who, emaciated and threadbare, dust-caked, sweat-soaked but alight with passion, rushed fearlessly into mortal peril at the end of the long, thirsty day's march. And there stirred in her a faint sense of resentment and regret at the thought that the café-keeper, her husband, would never go to Africa to study locusts. Young and unassuaged though she still was, she must for ever forgo the burning sands, the untrammelled love, the splendid ecstasies of suffering and remorse. Yet she felt that she had it in her, as much as any woman, to kindle the ardours of a soldier of mystery and hymn his death in impassioned couplets.

Abdel stood drinking his cup of coffee while M. Alceste explained to him the various classifications into which he would separate the human race were he God instead of being a café proprietor. Omnipotence would not cause him to be any more indulgent towards Abdel, whom without hesitation he assigned to the lowest category.

'The fact of having a personal acquaintance with you, in a manner of speaking, wouldn't make any difference to me if I was God. I know only too well what you're like to think for an instance – '

Suddenly M. Alceste broke off. Craning his neck he peered with a new intentness at this lowest form of human life, then stiffened in outraged astonishment and cried:

'Madame Alceste, have you noticed the way this animal looks at you? Have you seen the expression on his face?'

The words, which meant no more to him than the ones which had preceded them, did not cause Abdel to look elsewhere. Glancing up, Mme Alceste encountered that ravening gaze and her heart beat faster. As he leaned against the bar in his tattered army cape, with his brown, dirty face, Abdel appeared to her like a soldier, tanned by African suns, who bears beneath the folds of his sullied uniform the glorious scars of battle. She

seemed to be seeing in the flesh the heroic figure of her story, and in the depths of those hotly glowing eyes she read the savage male desire which only that instant she had been craving.

'Filthy swine!' cried her husband. 'So this is how you repay hospitality! Put that cup down at once!'

His threatening expression and the sound of his voice made it clear to Abdel that he had done something wrong, and putting down the cup he turned hastily towards the door. Mme Alceste had risen to her feet, her face pale and her hands pressed to her bosom, but a lingering sense of the domestic realities restrained her from intervening in response to the impulse of passion. Her husband was waving his broom at Abdel as he drove him out.

'I'll teach you to look at a lady like that! Get out, you dirty brute, and don't ever put your nose in here again!'

Torn with emotion though she was, Mme Alceste could not bring herself to utter a sound. Only when she saw Abdel's figure pass the window as he vanished along the Rue des Roses did she murmur beneath her breath:

'My legionary . . .'

Abdul went towards the Place Hébert pondering in perplexity over the sudden change in M. Alceste and having no notion what had brought it about. He was conscious of having behaved towards his host and hostess precisely as he always did, and no suspicion entered his head that his persistence in staring at Mme Alceste might have been the cause of her husband's fury. His desire for a woman so remote seemed to him too utterly vain a thing, too deeply buried in the depths of his humility, to attract the notice of those great ones of the Destin. And Mme Alceste's perturbation, even had it been more markedly displayed, would no less certainly have escaped him. There was in any case a simple explanation of his downfall,

namely, that he had ceased to please, and reasons were less important to him than consequences. The ban which had been placed on him entailed an upheaval in his daily habits which he viewed with great distress. It meant the end of those long periods of lounging outside M. Alceste's establishment, and of coffees drunk at the counter while over the rim of his cup he contemplated the pillowed shape of the *patronne*. His visits to the Destin had furnished matter for most of his dreaming during the long days which he passed in passing the time, and on the rare occasions when he ventured to contemplate the future, it was always in some sort of relationship with the Alcestes and their establishment that he envisaged his tomorrows.

When he came to the Place he stopped as usual and spent a moment reviewing the situation. It seemed to him that his life had been suddenly emptied of its content. He had no desire to wander at random, as he did on other days.

The neighbourhood oppressed him. Ordinarily he strayed about it rather as though everything in it came within the domain of the Destin. When he stole a fruit or a tin of food from a market-stall he felt himself protected by the distant presence of M. Alceste.

Looking up he gazed along the perspective of the Rue de l'Évangile, whose nakedness was veiled by a mist dirtied with smoke. It lay before him like a roadway to forgetfulness. He was tempted to enter it and, turning his back for ever upon the La Chapelle district, set out upon the discovery of new worlds. He walked round the Place and paused at the entrance to the street. An empty and silent corridor lay before him, implacably enclosed within tall grey walls, secret in its depths. Behind him he could hear the warm sounds of life, the movement of the quiet crossroads. Men went laughing into a café on the Place, and he seemed to catch the scent of sawdust and vermouth. A

soft nostalgia kept him motionless midway between the pavements. But a feeling of lassitude prevented him from essaying the unknown. For an instant he stared, hesitating, at the blue name-plate of the street, then he turned and went towards the market.

He walked fast, as though a perilous temptation dogged his heels, but by degrees the return of his daily preoccupations calmed him. Upon entering the covered market he had a stroke of luck. Almost at once he saw a wretchedly clad woman with a new-born child in her arms. In order to free her hand to smack another child, which clung wailing to her skirts, she put down her purse and shopping-bag on a pile of empty cases beside her. Abdel was impervious to pity and preferred to rob the poor, knowing by experience that the well-fed are dangerous in their reactions. He seized the purse, slipped it quietly into a pocket of his cape and gained the exit without being observed. Walking sedately along the Rue Pajol towards the Boulevard de la Chapelle he counted the money in the purse, which came to about ten francs. At the moment he was neither hungry nor thirsty and wished for nothing except to rest and escape his sense of frustration. After drifting uncertainly for a little while along the boulevard he entered a cheap-looking café. Half-a-dozen young men, regular Sunday customers, were seated round a table drinking and talking bicycles. Installed in the window a woman with platinum hair, past her first youth, was smiling at the strollers in the street. She also smiled from time to time at the young men in the café, but from no sordid motive, rather with a sort of servile amiability.

The *patron* greeted Abdel with a cold stare. The entrance of a figure so disreputable, on a Sunday morning, did no credit to his establishment. Abdel did not venture to sit down but went and stood at the counter. A serving-girl asked him suspiciously what he wanted. He displayed his money in the hollow of his

hand but could not answer her questions except with brief vocal sounds, at once hoarse and shrill. The *patron* observed these proceedings with a marked disapproval.

'That'll do. Give him a coffee and then he can clear out,' he said, speaking loudly in order to convey to the other customers that intrusions of this sort were not usual. And he added: 'A blackbird if ever there was one!'

The platinum blonde laughed, glancing at the young men. They paused in their conversation to stare at Abdel, not with malice but because his military cape amused them. Sensing more laughter on the way, Abdel had already begun to think of leaving, without even drinking his coffee. One of the young men got up, walked round him with an air of exaggerated admiration and said, pointing to the tattered, greasy garment:

'Please, sir, will you let me have the gent's natty suiting when it gets a bit worn?'

This occasioned a great burst of merriment. The blonde left her post of observation and came to the counter to ask Abdel the address of his tailor. The question was drowned by the laughter and loud voices of the others, much to her vexation. She dodged in front of Abdel as he made for the door, looking for another chance to score this triumph of wit. He tried to go round her, bumped into her unintentionally and trod on her toe. Thereupon she abused him in a furious voice, calling him scum and muck and a dirty black bastard, and followed him out into the street with further invective, telling him among other things that he was flea-ridden and rotted with shameful maladies. The passers-by paused, the better to behold the man who had drawn upon himself these cruel truths. But what troubled Abdel far more than the abuse, of which he could understand nothing except the intention, was the fact that there were two Arabs among the onlookers. These were decently and almost elegantly clad, and were accompanied by two women of the quarter who

were doubtless their wives, since one held a little dark-skinned, curly-haired girl by the hand. They gazed at him in silent and aloof rebuke, with more harshness than derision in their eyes. Abdel now bitterly regretted having paused on the threshold of the Rue de l'Évangile. He wanted only to escape from a decidedly hostile world.

* * *

He had gone two hundred yards along the Rue de l'Évangile and had passed the bend, so that he could no longer see the tall gasometers which from a distance seemed to dominate the landscape. The street, vanishing into mist, was reduced to nothing but its bare walls. Never in his previous attempts to explore it had he ventured so far, although on week-days there were passing lorries which brought with them a comforting sense of human companionship, however fleeting. But on a Sunday the street was dead, without a soul. It bore no impress of the life of man, and its tangible aspect, the stark walls and pavements, was so purely geometrical that all human context was lacking. Occasionally Abdel heard the whistle of a locomotive, like the cry of a bird over an autumn countryside. With every step he took he felt the town and the world slip farther away from him. The district of La Chapelle had become no more than a wavering image in his consciousness. His memories grew pale and were blotted out, patches of shadow were submerging even his most recent past. He tried to concentrate on the destination towards which he was moving, but he lacked the power to imagine it, even confusedly. His points of contact with life were steadily growing fewer. The very name of the street, which he had never been able to decipher on the blue plate, was unknown to him. He seemed to be nowhere, to be drifting in emptiness. Giddiness overtook him. He looked upwards to escape the oppression of the walls, but the sky was low and pressed down on him like a ceiling.

He came finally to a standstill in the middle of the street and stood staring at his cape and his feet in order to recover the sense of his own identity. The sight of his feet comforted him. One of his big toes protruded from a hole in his boot, and he amused himself by wiggling it. It was like meeting an old friend. He seemed to discover all the sweetness of life in the free movement of that toe, blackened with mud. A flash of memory returned to him. The game with his toe recalled a nightmare with which his slumbers were sometimes afflicted, and which was not dissimilar from the one he was living at that moment. In this dream he was borne off into the solitude of an inhuman chaos where formless mountains weighed upon him on all sides: and when he started into wakefulness the hard and greasy contact of his three stone steps filled him with an inexpressible joy, as though happiness were a thing born at the very confines of life, which earthly chances could enhance or diminish in detail but no more.

He wearied at length of his toes and returned to his state of disquiet. His courage had departed, his head was heavy and his legs weak. Before walking on he glanced over his shoulder and saw that mist had closed the street behind him. Undecided whether to turn back or go forward, he made several half-turns and ended by losing his sense of direction. The street was the same whichever way he looked, enclosed within high walls and ending in a mist. Alarmed and now resolved to turn back, he looked to right and left without being able to decide which way to go. Finally, persuading himself that he knew, he turned right and set off briskly. But then he began to doubt and came running back. He continued to go to and fro in this fashion for some minutes, always at a run and in growing terror at the thought of losing himself in the unknown. Fatigue and fear of going still further astray brought him finally to a stop. He began to wonder anxiously how long he had been wandering up

and down the Rue de l'Évangile, and he found that he had no idea. The sense of time itself was slipping away from him, and he feared lest he should be forgotten by life. Death appeared to him in the form of a blind, eternal hesitation between two directions. He began to examine the walls, looking for some human token to which he might pin his consciousness. Afraid of going too far he moved slowly, like a captive exploring his prison. And when he crossed the street to examine the opposite wall he experienced a shock of intense delight. Directly in front of him, traced carefully with a lump of coal on the plaster, was a legend in large capital letters – 'To the gallows with Casimir!' Abdel could not read, but the sense of the words would in any event have added nothing to his rapture. The message, meaningless though it was, was none the less a message from the living world. He could not take his eyes off it. Behind the tall black letters the entire universe again came into being. Through Casimir he saw the whole district of La Chapelle, the grey, faded streets, the provincial market, the drab little shops and damp cafés. The Destin stood out with an especial clarity, and the countenance of Mme Alceste, wrapped in mystery, hung dreaming in the frame of a capital letter. Older memories still were gradually reborn to him, of the sunlit lands, of his parents, of flocks and tillage and brightly coloured towns, and of dark towns and a prison and forgotten friends.

His confidence momentarily restored by these evocations he looked round for other inscriptions, more defined in their eloquence, which might enable him to recover his sense of direction; but his search was conducted in a haphazard fashion, so that before long he had lost sight of the four words written with coal. Alarmed at being unable to find them he began to turn in circles and then to run from one side of the street to the other. Finally chance again brought him to the black letters and after this he did not leave them. Squatting at the foot of the wall he

gazed inquiringly up at the magic formula, staring so intently at it that each group of letters became invested with a character of its own. But it was the word Casimir which pleased him most: a subtle charm emanated from that inscrutable array of hieroglyphics, lulling his anxieties to rest.

The approaching sound of an engine caused him to start to his feet. As he arose a car emerged from the mist at his right hand. It was travelling fast. Abdel ran off the pavement, shouting and gesticulating. Either because he was afraid of running down a madman, or because he thought he was being warned of some danger, the driver slowed, pulling up a few yards away, and with a movement of his head inquired what he wanted. Abdel's action had been quite spontaneous. He had had no time to think of anything to say, and in any case the conversation would have been difficult. In his confusion he pointed to the legend on the wall. Apparently indifferent to this sort of message, the driver shrugged his shoulders and let in his clutch. For an instant Abdel stayed motionless, then he ran shouting after the car with a vague notion that he would reach safety by keeping behind it.

For about twenty yards he almost succeeded in maintaining contact, spurting as the car gathered speed. The distance between them rapidly increased, and before long the car had vanished in the mist. But Abdel did not abandon the pursuit. He could still hear the hum of the engine, almost as reassuring as its visible presence. With his head down and his teeth clenched, he ran blindly, straining towards an objective which he did not even attempt to picture. At last his breath failed him and he stopped. A variety of sounds reached his ears. He thought he stood on the threshold of an unknown city, and then found that he was back at the little Place Hébert. Two women whom he remembered noticing as he passed that way were still gossiping in the doorway of a lodging-house. His journey down the Rue

de l'Évangile had lasted a little less than a quarter of an hour.

* * *

That night Abdel returned with feelings of warmth and gratitude to his three stone steps in the alleyway off the Rue des Roses. So joyfully did he count his blessings that he was slow to fall asleep, and as he was in the act of doing so he caught a faint sound of approaching footsteps. Someone came down the stairway and a foot bumped against his knee. He raised himself on one elbow. Night lay thickly over the alley, and thicker still in his own small nook. A feminine form, supple and rounded, bent over him. Nervous hands, rendered clumsy by impatience, sought the buttons of his cape. He was afraid to move. The woman pressed her body to his, slipping a hand under his shirt, and with her lips against his ear murmured in a low voice, 'My Legionary!' She repeated the words a number of times, with a stubborn pertinacity, like a person hammering in nails – 'My Legionary!' Abdel held his breath. All the sweetness of the rediscovered town descended that night upon his bed of stone.

Half an hour later the woman rose, repeating in a voice of great languor the same mysterious words. Abdel sought to discern the outline of her figure as she hurried away over the cobbles of the alley, but the night was too dark. He lay down again and at once fell into a deep sleep.

Upon awaking in the morning, huddled beneath his cape, he pondered for a long time over his visitor. Since he knew no women other than Mme Alceste, it was of her whom he first thought. The notion that she should have come to him seemed absurd; nevertheless he found it both agreeable and convenient to endow the unknown with the aspect of the woman he had desired. When he left the alley he avoided passing in front of

the Café du Destin, partly on account of his quarrel with M. Alceste, but principally from fear of affronting his good fortune. The recollection of the night was sufficient for the day's dreaming. Through the streets of the La Chapelle quarter he pursued the face of love in a state of happy perturbation, without effort, finding in it the likeness of Mme Alceste. As night fell his fear grew keener lest the beloved should not come again.

He returned to his lair as usual at nine o'clock. It occurred to him that he might keep watch at the end of the alley, but an obscure sense of the courtesy owing to an apparition deterred him from doing so. The unknown arrived punctually at a quarter to ten. She carried a rug this time which she spread over the stone, and which, moreover, she took away with her when she departed. Their love-making was like that of the previous night, and on this night too Abdel fell asleep without having seen his mistress's face. Nor did he any longer wish to see it, greatly preferring the vision of Mme Alceste.

On the third evening the unknown was again punctual but more summary in her gestures and somewhat irritable in her manner. No longer did she press her lips to Abdel's ear to murmur, 'My Legionary!', but confined her remarks to terse words of command. He was troubled by this, and he feared for the future. In the morning he awoke later than usual. As he emerged from the alleyway he saw M. Alceste, broom in hand, meditating in the doorway of the Destin, and he turned and went in the opposite direction. . . .

M. Alceste had noticed Abdel. He stared after him for a moment, then spat in the road and re-entered the café. Mme Alceste was reading the latest issue of her film magazine and a flush rose on her cheeks as she did so. The story she was now reading was enacted in the fashionable world. The son of a wealthy industrialist was playing tennis with a parentless girl

of unimpeachable connections. They were married at the church of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule after a series of high-minded misunderstandings which bore witness to the delicacy of their sentiments and the elegance of their wardrobes.

M. Alceste began shifting bottles in order to wipe a section of the counter. He stopped suddenly, put down his cloth and started to scratch his head with both hands. Glancing at his wife as he did so, he remarked:

'So you're having to scratch too?'

Mme Alceste looked up from her magazine with one hand to her head, blushed violently and replied:

'Yes. I don't know why.'

'My head's been itching for the last two days,' said M. Alceste, 'and this morning I feel as though I was being eaten alive. I couldn't say anything at the time, but just now, when I was serving the customers, I distinctly saw a flea on the counter. Luckily no one else noticed it, but upon my word. . . .'

For the next minute the pair scratched freely, abandoning concealment.

'I saw that Arab go past just now,' said M. Alceste, 'in that cape of his. I wonder if it's he who – '

'Just what I was going to say,' said Mme Alceste.

'He was here Sunday morning, if you remember. I was fool enough to call him in.'

'I said all along he shouldn't be allowed in here. You see, I was right.'

'It's quite true, and I ought to have had more sense. But apart from that, the Government didn't ought to allow those sort of creatures in the quarter. I've said so many a time.'

'Ah,' said Mme Alceste. 'We aren't properly protected.'

Both continued to scratch while she gazed raptly at the picture in her film magazine, of a glossy young gentleman in a dinner-jacket. Looking up she said:

'Why don't you speak to M. Ernest about it?'

'That's an idea. I'll try and catch him this afternoon.'

* * *

The two police inspectors entered the alleyway in the early hours of the morning. One was a young man wearing a soft felt hat over his ear and a raincoat of which the belt was fastened with a studied negligence. The other, M. Ernest, was more in the classic mould. Thick-set and moustached, with a butcher's shoulders and huge calves filling out his trouser-legs, he wore a bowler hat and a black overcoat of civil-service cut.

Abdel, who had passed a restless night vainly awaiting the coming of the unknown, was still slumbering on his three steps. M. Ernest shone an electric torch and for a moment stood scrutinising the heap of tattered clothing with an experienced eye.

'Look at him,' he said. 'When I tell Pondeur about this he won't believe me.'

He prodded the sleeper with his foot, shouting to him to get up. Scarcely taking time to stretch his body, Abdel sprang out of his lair. Despite the darkness, which prevented him from seeing the faces of his visitors, he guessed at once with whom he had to deal. M. Ernest examined him carefully by the light of the torch and said with distaste:

'Gutter sweepings. . . . Arab muck. . . . It's more like a job for the lost dogs department than for us.'

As Abdel started to utter high-pitched sounds of protest he prodded him with a disgusted finger and said:

'Pipe down, my beauty. You can say it all when we get you to the station.'

Abdel fell resignedly into step with the younger man. As they left the alleyway he glanced towards the Café du Destin. Customers were standing in the doorway. M. Alceste watched

him go by with an air of sympathy that was only slightly mocking. Mme Alceste wore a stern countenance.

His head drooping, his lids still heavy with sleep, Abdel passed on between his escorts, paying no attention to the familiar spectacle of the Rue des Roses. His present trouble caused him no more than a vague anxiety mingled with the lingering sorrow of the night and the fatigue due to loss of sleep. The two police officers chatted casually about their duties and their colleagues, almost forgetting him. The routine business of taking a vagrant into custody was too trifling to be of interest.

At that hour the Rue de l'Évangile was still empty and silent. No lorries passed along it. As they came to the Place Hébert, Abdel looked automatically towards it. Eddies of mist hung over the paving stones, making a soft pathway between the stark grey walls. At the bend the lofty gasometers, like huge, armoured fortresses, seemed to keep watch over the silence. Abdel took a step backwards and darted across the Place in the conviction that once he had reached the Rue de l'Évangile, cut off from the town and the whole world, no one would ever catch him. But the policemen overtook him within a few yards of sanctuary. He surrendered without resistance, and M. Ernest said, threatening him with the back of his big, hairy hand:

'That's enough of that!'

Two railway workers passed them on their way to the Rue des Roses, and one said, laughing, to the other:

'Look, the Fleabag's going off on holiday!'

As they turned into the Rue Pajol, Abdel gave a last glance behind him, making a movement with his shoulders as though he still had some notion of taking to his heels. With a surprising nimbleness in one of his age and corpulence, M. Ernest booted the back of his cape, delivering two powerful, shrewdly directed kicks that drew from him a grunt of pain. An old woman

walking her dog on the pavement made a gesture of pity and protest.

'That's how you have to treat this kind of animal,' the inspector said to her. 'It's the only thing they understand.'

The State of Grace

IN the year 1939 the best Christian in the Rue Gabrielle, and indeed in all Montmartre, was a certain Monsieur Duperrier, a man of such piety, uprightness and charity that God, without awaiting his death, and while he was still in the prime of life, crowned his head with a halo which never left it by day or by night. Like those in Paradise this halo, although made of some immaterial substance, manifested itself in the form of a whitish ring which looked as though it might have been cut out of fairly stiff cardboard, and shed a tender light. M. Duperrier wore it gratefully, with devout thanks to Heaven for a distinction which, however, his modesty did not permit him to regard as a formal undertaking in respect of the hereafter. He would have been unquestionably the happiest of men had his wife, instead of rejoicing in this signal mark of the Divine approval, not received it with outspoken resentment and exasperation.

'Well really, upon my word,' the lady said, 'what do you think you look like going round in a thing like that, and what do you suppose the neighbours and the tradespeople will say, not to mention my cousin Léopold? I never in my life saw anything so ridiculous. You'll have the whole neighbourhood talking.'

Mme Duperrier was an admirable woman, of outstanding piety and impeccable conduct, but she had not yet understood the vanity of the things of this world. Like so many people

whose aspirations to virtue are marred by a certain lack of logic, she thought it more important to be esteemed by her concierge than by her Creator. Her terror lest she should be questioned on the subject of the halo by one of the neighbours or by the milkman had from the very outset an embittering effect upon her. She made repeated attempts to snatch away the shimmering plate of light that adorned her husband's cranium, but with no more effect than if she had tried to grasp a sunbeam, and without altering its position by a hair's-breadth. Girdling the top of his forehead where the hair began, the halo hung low over the back of his neck, with a slight tilt which gave it a coquettish look.

The foretaste of beatitude did not cause Duperrier to overlook the consideration he owed to his wife's peace of mind. He himself possessed too great a sense of direction and modesty not to perceive that there were grounds for her disquiet. The gifts of God, especially when they wear a somewhat gratuitous aspect, are seldom accorded the respect they deserve, and the world is all too ready to find in them a subject of malicious gossip. Duperrier did his utmost, so far as the thing was possible, to make himself at all times inconspicuous. Regretfully putting aside the bowler hat which he had hitherto regarded as an indispensable attribute of his accountant's calling, he took to wearing a large felt hat, light in colour, of which the wide brim exactly covered the halo provided he wore it rakishly on the back of his head. Thus clad, there was nothing startlingly out-of-the-way in his appearance to attract the attention of the passer-by. The brim of his hat merely had a slight phosphorescence which by daylight might pass for the sheen on the surface of smooth felt. During office hours he was equally successful in avoiding the notice of his employer and fellow-workers. His desk, in the small shoe factory in Ménilmontant where he kept the books, was situated in a glass-paned cubby-

hole between two workshops, and his state of isolation saved him from awkward questions. He wore the hat all day, and no one was sufficiently interested to ask him why he did so.

But these precautions did not suffice to allay his wife's misgivings. It seemed to her that the halo must already be a subject of comment among the ladies of the district, and she went almost furtively about the streets adjoining the Rue Gabrielle, her buttocks contracted and her heart wrung with agonising suspicions, convinced that she heard the echo of mocking laughter as she passed. To this worthy woman who had never had any ambition other than to keep her place in a social sphere ruled by the cult of the absolute norm, the glaring eccentricity with which her husband had been afflicted rapidly assumed catastrophic proportions. Its very improbability made it monstrous. Nothing would have induced her to accompany him out of doors. The evenings and Sunday afternoons which they had previously devoted to small outings and visits to friends were now passed in a solitary intimacy which became daily more oppressive. In the living-room of light oak where between meals the long leisure hours dragged by, Mme Duperrier, unable to knit a single stitch, would sit bitterly contemplating the halo, while Duperrier, generally reading some work of devotion and feeling the brush of angels' wings, wore an expression of beatific rapture which added to her fury. From time to time, however, he would glance solicitously at her, and noting the expression of angry disapproval on her face would feel a regret which was incompatible with the gratitude he owed to Heaven, so that this in its turn inspired him with a feeling of remorse at one remove.

So painful a state of affairs could not long continue without imperilling the unhappy woman's mental equilibrium. She began presently to complain that the light of the halo, bathing the pillows, made it impossible for her to sleep at nights.

Duperrier, who sometimes made use of the divine illumination to read a chapter of the Scriptures, was obliged to concede the justice of this grievance, and he began to be afflicted with a sense of guilt. Finally, certain events, highly deplorable in their consequences, transformed this state of unease into one of acute crisis.

Upon setting out for the office one morning, Duperrier passed a funeral in the Rue Gabrielle, within a few yards of their house. He had become accustomed, outrageous though it was to his natural sense of courtesy, to greet acquaintances by merely raising a hand to his hat; but being thus confronted by the near presence of the dead he decided, after thinking the matter over, that nothing could relieve him of the obligation to uncover himself entirely. Several shopkeepers, yawning in their doorways, blinked at the sight of the halo, and gathered together to discuss the phenomenon. When she came out to do her shopping Mme Duperrier was assailed with questions, and in a state of extreme agitation uttered denials whose very vehemence appeared suspect. Upon his return home at midday her husband found her in a state of nervous crisis which caused him to fear for her reason.

'Take off that halo!' she cried. 'Take it off instantly! I never want to see it again!'

Duperrier gently reminded her that it was not in his power to remove it, whereupon she cried still more loudly:

'If you had any consideration for me you'd find some way of getting rid of it. You're simply selfish, that's what you are!'

These words, to which he prudently made no reply, gave Duperrier much food for thought. And on the following day a second incident occurred to point to the inevitable conclusion. Duperrier never missed early morning Mass, and since he had become endowed with the odour of sanctity he had taken to hearing it at the Basilica of the Sacré-Coeur. Here he was

obliged to remove his hat, but the church is a large one and at that hour of the morning the congregation was sufficiently sparse to make it a simple matter for him to hide behind a pillar. On this particular occasion, however, he must have been less circumspect than usual. As he was leaving the church after the service an elderly spinster flung herself at his feet crying, 'St Joseph! St Joseph!', and kissed the hem of his overcoat. Duperrier beat a hasty retreat, flattered but considerably put out at recognising his adorer, who lived only a few doors away. A few hours later the devoted creature burst into the apartment, where Mme Duperrier was alone, uttering cries of – 'St Joseph! I want to see St Joseph!'

Although somewhat lacking in brilliant and picturesque qualities, St Joseph is nevertheless an excellent saint: but his unsensational merits, with their flavour of solid craftsmanship and passive goodwill, seem to have brought upon him some degree of injustice. There are indeed persons, some of the utmost piety, who, without even being conscious of it, associate the notion of naïve complaisance with the part he played in the Nativity. This impression of simple-mindedness is further enhanced by the habit of super-imposing upon the figure of the saint the recollection of that other Joseph who resisted the advances of Potiphar's wife. Mme Duperrier had no great respect for the presumed sanctity of her husband, but this fervour of adoration which with loud cries invoked him by the name of St Joseph seemed to her to add the finishing touch to his shame and absurdity. Goaded into a state of almost demented fury, she chased the visitor out of the apartment with an umbrella and then smashed several piles of plates. Her first act upon her husband's return was to have hysterics, and when finally she had regained her self-control she said in a decided voice:

'For the last time I ask you to get rid of that halo. You can do it if you choose. You know you can.'

Duperrier hung his head, not daring to ask how she thought he should go about it, and she went on:

'It's perfectly simple. You only have to sin.'

Uttering no word of protest, Duperrier withdrew to the bedroom to pray.

'Almighty God,' he said in substance, 'you have granted me the highest reward that man may hope for upon earth, excepting martyrdom. I thank you, Lord, but I am married and I share with my wife the bread of tribulation which you deign to send us, no less than the honey of your favour. Only thus can a devout couple hope to walk in your footsteps. And it so happens that my wife cannot endure the sight or even the thought of my halo, not at all because it is a gift bestowed by Heaven but simply because it's a halo. You know what women are. When some unaccustomed happening does not chance to kindle their enthusiasm it is likely to upset all the store of rules and harmonies which they keep lodged in their little heads. No one can prevent this, and though my wife should live to be a hundred there will never be any place for my halo in her scheme of things. Oh God, you who see into my heart, you know how little store I set by my personal tranquillity and the evening slippers by the fireside. For the rapture of wearing upon my head the token of your goodwill I would gladly suffer even the most violent domestic upheavals. But, alas, it is not my own peace of mind that is imperilled. My wife is losing all taste for life. Worse still, I can see the day approaching when her hatred of my halo will cause her to revile Him who bestowed it upon me. Am I to allow the life-companion you chose for me to die and damn her soul for all eternity without making an effort to save her? I find myself today at the parting of the ways, and the safe road does not appear to me to be the more merciful. That your spirit of infinite justice may talk to me with the voice of my conscience is the prayer which

in this hour of my perplexity I lay at your radiant feet, oh Lord.'

Scarcely had Duperrier concluded this prayer than his conscience declared itself in favour of the way of sin, making of this an act of duty demanded by Christian charity. He returned to the living-room, where his wife awaited him, grinding her teeth.

'God is just,' he said, with his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat. 'He knew what he was doing when he gave me my halo. The truth is that I deserve it more than any man alive. They don't make men like me in these days. When I reflect upon the vileness of the human herd and then consider the manifold perfections embodied in myself I am tempted to spit in the faces of the people in the street. God has rewarded me, it is true, but if the Church had any regard for justice I should be an archbishop at the very least.'

Duperrier had chosen the sin of pride, which enabled him, while exalting his own merits, in the same breath to praise God, who had singled him out. His wife was not slow to realise that he was sinning deliberately and at once entered into the spirit of the thing.

'My angel,' she said, 'you will never know how proud I am of you. My cousin Léopold, with his car and his villa at Vesinet, is not worthy to unloose the latchet of your shoe.'

'That is precisely my own opinion. If I had chosen to concern myself with sordid matters I could have amassed a fortune as easily as any man, and a much bigger one than Léopold's, but I chose to follow a different road and my triumph is of another kind. I despise his money as I despise the man himself and all the countless other half-wits who are incapable of perceiving the grandeur of my modest existence. They have eyes and see not.'

The utterance of sentiments such as these, spoken at first

from half-closed lips, his heart rent with shame, became within a short time a simple matter for Duperrier, a habit costing him no effort at all. And such is the power of words over the human mind that it was not long before he accepted them as valid currency. His wife, however, anxiously watching the halo, and seeing that its lustre showed no sign of diminishing, began to suspect that her husband's sin was lacking in weight and substance. Duperrier readily agreed with this.

'Nothing could be more true,' he said. 'I thought I was giving way to pride when in fact I was merely expressing the most simple and obvious of truths. When a man has attained to the uttermost degree of perfection, as I have done, the word "pride" ceases to have any meaning.'

This did not prevent him from continuing to extol his merits, but at the same time he recognised the necessity for embarking upon some other form of sin. It appeared to him that gluttony was, of the Deadly Sins, the one most suited to his purpose, which was to rid himself of the halo without too far forfeiting the goodwill of Heaven. He was supported in this conclusion by the recollection, from his childhood days, of gentle scoldings for excessive indulgence in jam or chocolate. Filled with hope, his wife set about the preparation of rich dishes whose variety enhanced their savour. The Duperriers' dinner-table was loaded with game, pâté, river-trout, lobster, sweets, pastries and vintage wines. Their meals lasted twice as long as hitherto, if not three times. Nothing could have been more hideous and revolting than the spectacle of Duperrier, his napkin tied round his neck, his face crimson and his eyes glazed with satiation, loading his plate with a third helping, washing down roast and stuffing with great gulps of claret, belching, dribbling sauce and gravy, and perspiring freely under his halo. Before long he had developed such a taste for good cooking and rich repasts that he frequently rebuked his wife for an over-cooked joint or an un-

successful mayonnaise. One evening, annoyed by his incessant grumbling, she said sharply:

'Your halo seems to be flourishing. Anyone would think it was growing fat on my cooking, just as you are. It looks to me as though gluttony isn't a sin after all. The only thing against it is that it costs money, and I can see no reason why I shouldn't put you back on vegetable soup and spaghetti.'

'That's enough of that!' roared Duperrier. 'Put me back on vegetable soup and spaghetti, will you? By God, I'd like to see you try! Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? Put me back on spaghetti, indeed! The insolence! Here am I, wallowing in sin just to oblige you, and that's the way you talk. Don't let me hear another word. It would serve you right if I slapped your face.'

One sin leads to another, in short, and thwarted greed, no less than pride, promotes anger. Duperrier allowed himself to fall into this new sin without really knowing whether he was doing it for his wife's sake or because he enjoyed it. This man who had hitherto been distinguished by the gentleness and equability of his nature now became given to thunderous rages; he smashed the crockery and on occasions went so far as to strike his wife. He even swore, invoking the name of his Creator. But his outbursts, growing steadily more frequent, did not save him from being both arrogant and gluttonous. He was, in fact, now sinning in three different ways, and Mme Duperrier mused darkly on God's infinite indulgence.

The fact is that the noblest of virtues can continue to flourish in a soul sullied by sin. Proud, gluttonous and choleric, Duperrier nevertheless remained steeped in Christian charity, nor had he lost anything of his lofty sense of duty as a man and a husband. Finding that Heaven remained unmoved by his anger, he resolved to be envious as well. To tell the truth, without his knowing it, envy had already crept into his soul. Rich feeding,

which puts a burden on the liver, and pride, which stirs the sense of injustice, may dispose even the best of men to envy his neighbour. And anger lent a note of hatred to Duperrier's envy. He became jealous of his relations, his friends, his employer, the shopkeepers of the neighbourhood and even the stars of sport and screen whose photographs appeared in the papers. Everything infuriated him, and he was known to tremble with ignoble rage at the thought that the people next door possessed a cutlery service with silver handles, whereas his own were only of bone. But the halo continued to glow with undiminished brightness. Instead of being dismayed by this, he concluded that his sins were lacking in reality, and he had no difficulty in reasoning that his supposed gluttony did not in fact exceed the natural demands of a healthy appetite, while his anger and his envy merely bore witness to a lofty craving for justice. It was the halo itself, however, which furnished him with the most solid arguments.

'I'm bound to say I would have expected Heaven to be a little more fussy,' his wife said. 'If all your gluttony and boasting and brutality and malice have done nothing to dim your halo, it doesn't look as though I need worry about *my* place in Paradise.'

'Hold your jaw!' roared the furious man. 'How much longer have I got to listen to your nagging? I'm fed up with it. You think it funny, do you, that a saintly character like myself should have to plunge into sin for the sake of your blasted peace of mind? Stow it, d'you hear me?'

The tone of these replies was clearly lacking in that suavity which may rightly be looked for in a man enhaloed by the glory of God. Since he had entered upon the paths of sin Duperrier had become increasingly given to strong language. His formerly ascetic countenance was becoming bloated with rich food. Not only was his vocabulary growing coarse, but a similar vulgarity

was invading his thoughts. His vision of Paradise, for example, had undergone a notable transformation. Instead of appearing to him as a symphony of souls in robes of cellophane, the dwelling-place of the elect came to look more and more like a vast dining-room. Mme Duperrier did not fail to observe the changes that were overtaking her husband and even to feel some anxiety for the future. Nevertheless, the thought of his possible descent into the abyss still did not outweigh in her mind the horror of singularity. Rather than an enhaloed Duperrier she would have preferred a husband who was an atheist, a debauchee and as crude of speech as her cousin Léopold. At least she would not then have to blush for him before the milkman.

No especial decision was called for on the part of Duperrier for him to lapse into the sin of sloth. The arrogant belief that he was required at the office to perform tasks unworthy of his merits, together with the drowsiness caused by heavy eating and drinking, made him naturally disposed to be idle; and since he had sufficient conceit to believe that he must excel in all things, even the worst, he very soon became a model of indolence. The day his indignant employer sacked him, he received the sentence with his hat in his hand.

'What's that on your head?' his employer asked.

'A halo,' said Duperrier.

'Is it indeed? And I suppose that's what you've been fooling around with when you were supposed to be working?'

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

'It seems to me that this would be a good moment to try the sin of avarice,' he answered gaily.

Of all the Deadly Sins, avarice was the one that called for the greatest effort of willpower on his part. To those not born avaricious it is the vice offering the fewest easy allurements, and

when it is adopted on principle there is nothing to distinguish it, at least in the early stages, from that most sterling of all virtues, thrift. Duperrier subjected himself to severe disciplines, such as confining himself to gluttony, and thus succeeded in gaining a solid reputation for avarice among his friends and acquaintances. He really liked money for its own sake, and was better able than most people to experience the malicious thrill which misers feel at the thought that they control a source of creative energy and prevent it from functioning. Counting up his savings, the fruit of a hitherto laborious existence, he came by degrees to know the hideous pleasure of harming others by damming a current of exchange and of life. This outcome, simply because it was painfully achieved, filled Mme Duperrier with hope. Her husband had yielded so easily to the seductions of the other sins that God, she thought, could not condemn him very severely for an innocent, animal surrender which made him appear rather a victim deserving of compassion. His deliberate and patient progress along the road of avarice, on the other hand, could only be the fruit of a perverse desire which was like a direct challenge to Heaven. Nevertheless, although Duperrier became miserly to the point of putting trouser-buttons in the collection-bag, the brilliance and size of the halo remained unimpaired. This new setback, duly noted, plunged husband and wife into despair.

Proud, gluttonous, angry, envious, slothful and avaricious, Duperrier felt that his soul was still perfumed with innocence. Deadly though they were, the six sins he had thus far practised were nevertheless such as a first communicant may confess to without despairing. The deadliest of all, lust, filled him with horror. The others, it seemed to him, might be said to exist almost outside the sphere of God's notice. In the case of each, sin or peccadillo, it all depended on the size of the dose. But lust, the sin of the flesh, meant unqualified acceptance of the

Devil's work. The enchantments of the night were a foretaste of the burning shades of Hell, the darting tongues were like the flames of eternity, the moans of ecstasy, the writhing bodies, these did but herald the wailing of the damned and the convulsions of flesh racked by endless torment. Duperrier had not deliberately reserved the sin of the flesh to the last: he had simply refused to contemplate it. Mme Duperrier herself could not think of it without disquiet. For many years the pair had lived in a state of delicious chastity, their nightly rest attended, until the coming of the halo, by dreams as pure as the driven snow. As she thought of it, the recollection of those years of continence was a source of considerable annoyance to Mme Duperrier, for she did not doubt that the halo was the result. Plainly that lily-white nimbus could be undone by lust alone.

Duperrier, after obstinately resisting his wife's persuasions, at length allowed himself to be overborne. Once again his sense of duty cast out fear. Having reached the decision he was embarrassed by his ignorance; but his wife, who thought of everything, bought him a revolting book in which all the essentials were set forth in the form of plain and simple instruction. The night-time spectacle of that saintly man, the halo encircling his head, reading a chapter of the abominable work to his wife, was a poignant one indeed. Often his voice trembled at some infamous word or some image more hideously evocative than the rest. Having thus achieved a theoretical mastery of the subject, he still delayed while he considered whether this last sin should be consummated in domestic intimacy or elsewhere. Mme Duperrier took the view that it should all be done at home, adducing reasons of economy which did not fail to weigh with him; but having considered all the pros and cons he concluded that he had no need to involve her in vile practices which might be prejudicial to her own salvation. As a loyal husband he valiantly resolved that he alone should run the risks.

Thereafter Duperrier spent most of his nights in disreputable hotels where he pursued his initiation in company with the professionals of the quarter. The halo, which he could not conceal from these wretched associates, led to his finding himself in various odd situations, sometimes embarrassing and sometimes advantageous. In the beginning, owing to his anxiety to conform to the instructions in his manual, he sinned with little exaltation but rather with the methodical application of a dancer learning a new step or figure of choreography. However, the desire for perfection to which his pride impelled him soon achieved its lamentable reward in the notoriety which he gained among the women with whom he consorted. Although he came to take the liveliest pleasure in these pursuits, Duperrier nevertheless found them expensive and was cruelly afflicted in his avarice. One evening on the Place Pigalle he made the acquaintance of a creature twenty years of age, already a lost soul, whose name was Marie-Jannick. It was for her, so it is believed, that the poet Maurice Fombeure wrote the charming lines:

C'est Marie-Jannick
De Landivisiau
Qui tue les moustiques
Avec son sabot.

Marie-Jannick had come from Brittany six months previously to go into service as maid-of-all-work in the home of a municipal councillor who was both a socialist and an atheist. Finding herself unable to endure the life of this godless household, she had given notice and was now courageously earning her living on the Boulevard de Clichy. As was to be expected, the halo made a deep impression on that little religious soul. To Marie-Jannick, Duperrier seemed the equal of St Yves and St

Ronan, and he, on his side, was not slow to perceive the influence he had over her and to turn it to profit.

Thus it is that on this very day, the 22nd February of the year 1944, amid the darkness of winter and of war, Marie-Jannick, who will shortly be twenty-five, may be seen walking her beat on the Boulevard de Clichy. During the black-out hours the stroller between the Place Pigalle and the Rue des Martyrs may be startled to observe, floating and swaying in the darkness, a mysterious circle of light that looks rather like a ring of Saturn. It is Duperrier, his head adorned with the glorious halo which he no longer seeks to conceal from the curiosity of all and sundry; Duperrier, burdened with the weight of the seven Deadly Sins, who, lost to all shame, supervises the labours of Marie-Jannick, administering a smart kick in the pants when her zeal flags, and waiting at the hotel door to count her takings by the light of the halo. But from the depths of his degradation, through the dark night of his conscience, a murmur yet rises from time to time to his lips, a prayer of thanksgiving for the absolute gratuity of the gifts of God.

The Proverb

BY the light of the hanging bulbs in the kitchen M. Jacotin surveyed his assembled family, who sat with their heads bowed over their plates, betraying by sidelong glances their mistrust of the master's mood. A profound consciousness of his own devotion and self-abnegation, together with an acute sense of domestic justice, did indeed render M. Jacotin both unjust and tyrannical, and his choleric explosions, always unpredictable, created in his household an atmosphere of constraint which in its turn had an irritating effect upon him.

Having learned during the afternoon that his name had been put forward for the *palmes académiques*, he had resolved to await the ending of the meal before informing his nearest and dearest; and now, after drinking a glass of wine with his cheese, he was ready to make the pronouncement. But the general tone of the gathering seemed to him not altogether propitious to the reception of the great news. His gaze went slowly round the table, pausing first at his wife, whose sickly aspect and timid, melancholy expression did him so little credit with his colleagues. He turned next to Aunt Julie, who was seated by the fireside in manifestation of her advanced age and several incurable maladies, and who in the past seven years must certainly have cost him more than was to be looked for under her will. Then came his two daughters, aged seventeen and sixteen,

shop assistants at five hundred francs a month but dressed like film-stars, with wrist-watches, gold brooches at the bosom of their blouses, a general look of being above their station so that one wondered where the money came from and was amazed. M. Jacotin had a sudden intolerable feeling that his substance was filched from him, that the sweat of his labours was sucked dry, and that he was long-suffering to the point of absurdity. The wine rose in a wave to his head, suffusing his broad face, which was noteworthy for its redness even in repose.

And while he was in the grip of this emotion his gaze fell upon his thirteen-year-old son, Lucien, who since the beginning of supper had been doing his best to escape notice. There was something suspect in the pallor of the boy's face. He did not look up, but feeling his father's eyes upon him he twisted a corner of his black, schoolboy's overall with both hands.

'Trying to tear it, are you?' said M. Jacotin in a voice filled with gloating. 'You seem to be doing your best to destroy it.'

Lucien let go his apron and put his hands on the table. He bent over his plate without daring to seek the comfort of his sisters' glance, lonely in the face of approaching calamity.

'Do you hear me speaking to you? Can't you answer? I'm beginning to think you aren't quite easy in your mind.'

Lucien replied with a look of apprehension, not from any hope of disarming suspicion but because he knew his father would be disappointed not to see alarm in his eyes.

'No, your conscience is certainly not clear. Will you please tell me what you've been doing this afternoon?'

'I was with Pichon. He said he'd come and fetch me at two. Then we met Chapusot, who had to go to the doctor because his uncle's ill. The day before yesterday his uncle started having a pain on his liver and – '

But realising that the anecdote was designed to divert his attention, M. Jacotin cut it short.

'Never mind about other people's livers. Nobody bothers about my liver. Tell me what you did this morning.'

'I went with Fourmot to see the house in the Avenue Poincaré that was burnt down the other night.'

'In fact, you've been out all day, from first thing in the morning until this evening. Well, if you can afford to spend the whole of your Thursday amusing yourself, I take it that means you've done all your homework.'

M. Jacotin uttered these words in a voice of mildness that caused all his hearers to hold their breath.

'My homework?' murmured Lucien.

'Yes, your homework.'

'I worked yesterday evening when I got back from school.'

'I'm not asking whether you worked yesterday evening. I'm asking if you have done your homework for tomorrow.'

The others felt the crisis approaching and longed to avert it, but experience had taught them that any intervention in these circumstances would only make things worse, transforming the choleric man's ill-temper into fury. Lucien's sisters tactfully pretended to ignore the scene, while his mother, preferring not to be too close a witness, got up and went to a cupboard. M. Jacotin himself, not yet launched upon his wrath, was reluctant to postpone the news of the *palmes académiques*. But Aunt Julie, moved to sympathy, could not hold her tongue.

'The way you always go on at the poor boy! He told you he worked yesterday evening. He has to play sometimes.'

M. Jacotin replied with dignity:

'I must ask you kindly not to interfere with my efforts to assist my son's education. Being his father, I act as such, and I shall continue to supervise his activities as I think fit. When you have children of your own you will be at liberty to indulge them in any way you choose.'

Aunt Julie, being seventy-three, seemed to detect a hint of

irony in this reference to her future offspring. Greatly offended, she rose and left the kitchen. Lucien, apprehensively watching her departure, saw her for an instant groping for the switch in the half-light of the spotlessly clean living-room. When she had shut the door behind her M. Jacotin called the family to witness that he had said nothing to warrant her withdrawal, and he went on to protest at a scheming manoeuvre designed to show him in an unfavourable light. But neither his daughters, who had begun to clear the table, nor his wife could bring themselves to acquiesce, although by doing so they might have relieved the tension. Their silence did him further outrage and he returned furiously to Lucien:

'I'm still waiting for your answer. Have you finished your homework or not?'

Realising that he had nothing to gain by prolonging the agony, Lucien threw in his hand.

'I haven't done my French.'

A gleam of thankfulness appeared in M. Jacotin's eyes. It was agreeable to tackle this boy.

'And why not, may I ask?'

Lucien raised his shoulders in token of ignorance and even of astonishment, as though the question had taken him by surprise.

'I'm waiting,' said M. Jacotin, gazing intently at him.

For a moment longer he sat meditating in silence upon the iniquity and abject state of this graceless son, who for no avowable reason and with no appearance of remorse had failed to do his French homework.

'It's as I thought,' he said, his voice gradually rising with his eloquence. 'Not only do you neglect your work, but you do so deliberately. This French homework was set last Friday, to be shown up tomorrow. That is to say, you had a week to do it in, but you haven't done it. And if I had said nothing you would

have gone to school tomorrow with it still not done. Worst of all, you have spent the whole of today idling and loafing. And with whom? With Pichon, Fourmont, Chapusot – boys as lazy as yourself, all at the bottom of the class! Birds of a feather flock together. It would naturally never have occurred to you to visit Béruchard. You would think it a disgrace, I suppose, to go and play with a good boy. But in any case Béruchard wouldn't want you. I'm sure he doesn't waste his time playing. He's not an idler, like you. Béruchard is a worker, and the result is he's always near the top. Only last week he was nine places above you. You can imagine how pleasant that is for me, seeing that I have to spend all day at the office with his father. A man, I may add, who is less well thought of than I am. A hard-working fellow, no doubt, but lacking in ability. And as limited in his political outlook as he is in his work. He has never had any imagination and he knows it. When we're discussing general topics, the other men and I, he keeps pretty quiet. But that doesn't stop him scoring over me whenever he mentions his son. And it puts me in a very awkward position. I'm not lucky enough to have a son like Béruchard's, always first in French and maths, a boy who walks off with all the prizes. Lucien, kindly stop fiddling with that napkin-ring. I will not tolerate impertinence. Are you listening, or do you want a box on the ears to remind you that I'm your father? Idle, useless oaf that you are! Your French homework was set a week ago. You can't pretend that this would have happened if you had any feeling for me or any sense of the burden you are to me. When I think of all the work I have to do, and my worries and anxieties, both for the present and the future! There'll be no one to keep me when I have to retire. One has to rely upon oneself in this world, not on other people. I've never asked a halfpenny of anyone, or expected any help from my neighbour when I was in trouble. I got nothing from my family either. My father didn't

let me stay at school. I started my apprenticeship when I was twelve. Out in all weathers pulling the barrow, chilblains in winter and the shirt clinging to my back in summer. But you just loaf your time away because by good luck you have an over-indulgent father. But don't imagine it will last for ever. The more I think of it – your French homework utterly neglected! Lazy young lout! It never pays to be kind, people mistake it for weakness. And just when I was planning to take you all to the theatre on Wednesday, to see "Les Burgraves". Little did I think what I should find when I got home! It's always the same – when I'm not here the place is in a state of chaos, homework not done, nothing done properly. And of course you had to choose the very day when . . .'

Here M. Jacotin made a pause. A sense of delicacy, of coyness and modesty, caused him to lower his eyes.

'. . . the day when I learnt that my name has been put forward for the *palmes académiques*. That is the day you have chosen!'

He paused again, awaiting the effect of these words. But, following so abruptly upon the lengthy exordium, they seemed not to have been understood. The others had heard the sound, as they had heard the rest of his discourse, without grasping the sense. Only Mme Jacotin, who knew that for two years her husband had been hoping for some recognition of his services as Honorary Treasurer of the local Musical Society, had the impression that something of importance had fallen from his lips. The words '*palmes académiques*' reached her ears with a sound at once familiar and exotic, evoking in her mind an image of her husband, in his honorary musician's cap, seated astride the topmost branches of a coconut palm. Her fear of having been inattentive caused her at length to grasp the meaning of this poetic vision, and she opened her mouth, prepared to utter sounds of deferent rejoicing. But it was too late. M.

Jacotin, taking an acid pleasure in his family's indifference, and fearing lest a word from his wife might soften the effect of their heavy silence, hastened to forestall her.

'To continue,' he said with a mirthless laugh. 'I was saying that you have had a week in which to do this French homework. A week! I should like to know when Béruchard did his. I'm quite sure it didn't take him a week, or even half a week. I've no doubt Béruchard got it done next day. And now will you tell me what the homework consists of?'

Lucien, who was not listening, let slip the interval for a reply. His father called him to attention in a voice that could be heard three doors away, startling Aunt Julie in her bedroom. In her night attire and with a woebegone countenance she came to inquire the cause of the disturbance.

'What's the matter? What are you doing to that child? I insist upon knowing!'

Misfortune willed it that at this moment M. Jacotin's mind was principally occupied with the thought of his *palmes académiques*, and for this reason his patience failed him. Even at the height of his rages he was accustomed to express himself with moderation. But that an old woman taken into his home from charitable motives should thus browbeat a man on the verge of being decorated, seemed to him a provocation warranting extreme language.

'As for you,' he said, 'I can tell you what you are in five letters.'

Aunt Julie gaped, round-eyed and unbelieving, and when he stated specifically what the five letters spelt she swooned. There were cries of alarm and a prolonged, dramatic hub-bub filled with the clatter of kettles, bottles and cups and saucers. Lucien's mother and sisters busied themselves about the sufferer with words of sympathy and consolation, each one a dart in M. Jacotin's flesh. They avoided looking at him, and

when by chance their heads turned his way their eyes were hard. Conscious of his guilt, and feeling sorry for the old girl, he genuinely regretted his coarseness. Indeed, he would have liked to apologise, but in face of this ostentatious condemnation his pride hardened. As Aunt Julie was being led back to her room he said in a loud, clear voice:

'For the third time, will you tell me what your French homework is?'

'It's an essay,' said Lucien. 'I have to illustrate the proverb, "Nothing is gained by running: it is better to start in time." '

'Well? That doesn't sound very difficult.'

Lucien nodded as though in agreement but with a non-committal expression.

'Anyway, get your books and start work. I want to see it finished.'

Lucien fetched his satchel, which was lying in a corner of the kitchen, got out his rough notebook and wrote at the head of a virgin page, 'Nothing is gained by running: it is better to start in time'. Slowly though his hand moved, he could not make this take more than a minute or two. He then sucked the end of his pen while he brooded over the words with a hostile and sulky air.

'I can see you aren't really trying,' said his father. 'Well, please yourself. I'm in no hurry. I'm quite prepared to sit up all night.'

He had settled himself comfortably and in an attitude of calm resolution that filled Lucien with despair. He tried to think about the proverb, 'Nothing is gained by running: it is better to start in time'. The thing seemed to him too obvious to call for demonstration, and he thought with scorn of La Fontaine's fable about the Hare and the Tortoise. Meanwhile his sisters, after getting Aunt Julie to bed, had begun to put the dishes and plates back in the dresser. Despite their attempts to

do so silently they made rattling sounds that irritated M. Jacotin, who suspected them of trying to provide their brother with an excuse for doing nothing. And suddenly there was a hideous clatter. His wife had let fall an iron saucepan over the sink so that it rebounded on to the floor.

'Be careful, can't you?' snapped M. Jacotin. 'It's really very trying. How do you expect the boy to work with this racket going on? Go away and don't disturb him. You've finished washing up. Go to bed.'

The women left the kitchen at once. Lucien was left defenceless, at the mercy of his father and the night, and conjuring up a vision of death in the dawn, strangled by a proverb, he burst into tears.

'A lot of good that's going to do you,' said his father. 'Don't be a little ass!'

Although he spoke roughly there was now a hint of compassion in his voice, for M. Jacotin, still upset by the crisis he had provoked, hoped to redeem himself by showing some clemency in his treatment of his son. Perceiving the change, Lucien's self-pity deepened and he wept the more. His father, genuinely touched, came round the table bringing a chair with him and seated himself at the boy's side.

'That'll do. Get out your handkerchief and stop crying. At your age you ought to understand that if I'm hard on you it's for your own good. Later on you'll see that I was right. There's nothing better for a boy than a father who knows how to be stern. Oddly enough, Béruchard was saying the same thing to me only the other day. He makes no bones about beating his lad. Sometimes he'll just give him a clout or a kick in the pants, but at other times it's the cane. And he gets good results, what's more. He knows the boy's on the right road and that he'll go far. But I could never bring myself to strike a child, except of course just now and then, on the spur of the moment. We all

have our own methods, as I said to Béruchard. Personally I think it's better to use persuasion.'

Disarmed by these soothing words, Lucien had stopped crying, a fact which caused his father to feel certain misgivings.

'Mind you, you mustn't mistake it for weakness on my part if I talk to you as though you were grown up!'

'Oh, no!' said Lucien in a voice of profound conviction.

Reassured, M. Jacotin mellowed again. As he considered the proverb on the one hand and his son's distress on the other, it seemed to him that he could afford to be generous, and he said amiably:

'I can see that if I don't lend you a hand we shall be here till breakfast. We'd better get started. We have to show that "Nothing is gained by running: it is better to start in time". Well, now let me see. Nothing is gained by running . . .'

Until this moment the subject of the essay had appeared to M. Jacotin almost ludicrously simple; but now that he had taken over the job he began to see it in a different light. With a somewhat worried expression he re-read the sentence several times and then murmured:

'It's a proverb.'

'Yes,' said Lucien, and sat confidently awaiting further enlightenment.

His innocent trustfulness touched M. Jacotin's heart, while at the same time the thought that his prestige as a father was at stake occasioned in him a certain dismay.

'Did your master say anything when he set the subject?' he asked.

'He said, "Whatever else you do, don't quote the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise. You must find an example of your own." That's what he said.'

'Ha!' said M. Jacotin. 'I must say, the Hare and the Tortoise is an excellent illustration. I hadn't thought of that.'

'But it's forbidden.'

'Yes, of course – forbidden. But good God, if everything's forbidden – !'

His face a little suffused, M. Jacotin groped round for some other idea, or at the very least for a phrase which would serve as a point of departure. His imagination did not prove helpful. He began to consider the proverb with feelings of alarm and exasperation, and by degrees his face assumed the same expression of boredom that Lucien's had worn a short time before.

Finally a notion occurred to him arising out of a newspaper headline that had caught his eye only that morning – 'The Armaments Race'. It promised well. A certain country has for a long time been preparing for war, producing guns, tanks, bombs and aircraft, while its neighbour has been sluggish in its preparations, so that when war breaks out it is by no means ready and struggles in vain to catch up. Here was the material for an admirable essay.

But then M. Jacotin's countenance, which had momentarily lightened, again grew sombre. He had recalled that his political creed did not permit him to choose an example so tendentious in its nature. He was too high-minded to do injury to his principles, but it was a great pity. Despite the firmness of his convictions he could not help slightly regretting that he was not the helot of one of the parties of reaction, which would have allowed him to develop the idea with the approval of his conscience. He consoled himself with the thought of the *palmes académiques*, but gloomily, none the less.

Lucien sat placidly awaiting the outcome of his meditations. Having, as he considered, been relieved of the task of elucidating the proverb, he was no longer even thinking about it. But his father's protracted silence made the time seem slow in passing. His lids drooped and he yawned widely several times. To M. Jacotin, tight-lipped with the effort of concentration, these

yawns were a reproach, and his state of nervous tension increased. Rack his brains as he would, he could think of nothing else. The armaments race had become a hindrance. It seemed to have attached itself to the proverb, and his very attempts to dismiss it brought it the more vividly to his mind. From time to time he glanced covertly and anxiously at his son.

At length, when he had almost given up hope and was on the verge of admitting failure, he had another idea. It came to him as a sort of off-shoot of the armaments race, dispelling that obsession from his mind. This time it was a sporting contest – two crews of oarsmen in training, the one going about it methodically, the other with a negligent air.

'Right,' said M. Jacotin. 'Take this down.'

Lucien, who was dozing, started and reached hastily for his pen.

'What! Do you mean to say you were asleep?'

'Oh, no. I was thinking. I was thinking about the proverb. But I couldn't think of anything.'

M. Jacotin chuckled indulgently. Then his gaze became fixed and he began slowly to dictate.

'On this glorious Sunday afternoon, comma, what are those long, comma, slender, comma, green objects that present themselves to our gaze? Seen at a distance one might suppose them to possess long arms, but those arms are none other than oars, and the green objects are in reality racing-boats rocking gently upon the waters of the Marne . . .'

Lucien at this point raised his head and looked at his father in some alarm, but M. Jacotin, absorbed in polishing a transitional phrase which would enable him to introduce the rival crews, paid no attention. With mouth half-open and eyes half-closed he was contemplating his oarsmen and grouping them within the structure of his argument. His hand groped for his son's pen.

'Give that to me. I'll write it myself. It's better than dictating.'

He began to write feverishly and copiously. Thoughts and words came in an effortless flow, and in a sequence that was at once convenient and exhilarating, lending itself to lyrical treatment. He felt rich, master of a fruitful and abundant domain. For a few more moments, and still with apprehension, Lucien watched the inspired pen travelling rapidly across the page of his exercise book, and then he fell asleep with his head on the table. At eleven o'clock his father woke him and handed the book back.

'Now you must copy it out carefully. I'll go over it when you've finished. Take particular care with the punctuation.'

'It's rather late,' said Lucien. 'Perhaps it would be better if I got up early in the morning.'

'No, no. One must strike while the iron's hot. And there's another proverb for you!' M. Jacotin smiled delightedly and added: 'What's more, it's another that I should have no difficulty in illustrating. I'd be quite ready to tackle it, if I could spare the time. A splendid subject. I could do you a dozen pages on it. Well, at least I hope you understand what it means.'

'What?'

'I'm asking you if you know the meaning of the proverb, "Strike while the iron's hot." '

Lucien nearly gave way to despair. He pulled himself together and said very gently:

'Yes, father, I understand it. But now I must copy this one.'

'That's right, copy it out,' said M. Jacotin in the tone of one who disdains the humbler activities.

A week later Lucien's form master returned the corrected essays.

'Taking them all round,' he said, 'they're a poor lot. Apart from Béruchard, who gets thirteen, and three or four others, none of you has understood the subject.'

He went on to explain what should have been done, and then selected for comment three out of the pile of exercise books with their red ink markings. The first was Béruchard's, which he praised. The third was Lucien's.

'When I read your essay, Jacotin, I was startled by a literary manner to which you have not accustomed me, and which I found so distasteful that I had no hesitation in giving you only three. If I have often in the past had occasion to complain of your flatfootedness, this time you have gone to the opposite extreme. You have managed to fill six pages with matter that is entirely beside the point. And what is most intolerable is the odiously florid style you have seen fit to adopt.'

The master talked for some time about Lucien's essay, offering it to the class as a model of what not to do. He read out certain passages which he thought especially instructive. There were grins and titters and even one or two bursts of prolonged laughter. Lucien turned very pale, deeply wounded in his sense of filial piety no less than in his self-esteem.

And at the same time he was furious with his father for having brought this mockery upon him. Indifferent scholar though he was, neither his negligence nor his ignorance had hitherto exposed him to ridicule. Whether the subject was French, Latin or algebra, he contrived in his very inadequacy to show a regard for the scholastic proprieties and even for scholastic elegance. When he had copied his father's text, his eyes half-closing with sleep, he had had little doubt as to how the essay would be received. In the morning, with his wits about him, he had been half-inclined not to show it up, being more than ever conscious of its many discordances and false notes in terms of what was acceptable in the classroom. But at the last

moment an instinctive trust in his father's infallibility had decided the matter.

When he came home at midday he was still angrily brooding over that impulse of almost religious faith which had caused him to go against his better judgement. What business had his father to do his homework for him? It served him right that he had only got three out of twenty, and perhaps this would cure him of trying to write essays. And Béruchard had got thirteen. Father would find that hard to swallow. That would teach him!

As they sat down to lunch M. Jacotin appeared gay and almost amiable, his looks and words invested with a slightly feverish liveliness. He coyly refrained from at once asking the question which was uppermost in his mind and his son's. The atmosphere round the table was not much different from that of other days. The father's high spirits, far from putting the rest at ease, were rather an added source of discomfort. Mme Jacotin and her daughters struggled in vain to adapt their manner to his own, while Aunt Julie made a point of emphasising, by her sulky demeanour and air of offended surprise, how strange this display of good humour appeared in the eyes of the family. M. Jacotin evidently felt it himself, because his mood rapidly darkened.

'Well,' he said abruptly, 'and what about the proverb?'

His voice betrayed an emotion more akin to nervousness than to mere impatience. And in that instant Lucien perceived that he had the power to do lasting injury to his father. He saw him suddenly with a detachment that delivered him into his hands. He realised that for many years the unhappy man had lived on the sense of his infallibility as head of the household, and that when he had set out to elucidate the proverb he had exposed this principle to a dangerous hazard. Not only was the domestic tyrant about to lose face in the eyes of his family, but the

consideration in which he held himself would also be undermined. It would be a disaster. In the familiar setting of the kitchen, the group round the table, Aunt Julie ever-watchful for the chance to score a point, the crisis that a single word might provoke assumed a shattering reality. Confronted by the startling discovery of his father's weakness, Lucien's heart melted in generous commiseration.

'Have you gone to sleep? I'm asking you if your master has returned my essay,' said M. Jacotin.

'Your essay? Yes, he gave it back.'

'And how many marks did we get?'

'Thirteen.'

'Well, that's not bad. How about Béruchard?'

'He got thirteen too.'

'And what was the most anyone got?'

'Thirteen.'

M. Jacotin was radiant. He turned to gaze fixedly at Aunt Julie, as though the thirteen marks had been awarded in her despite. Lucien had lowered his eyes and was communing with himself in secret gratification. M. Jacotin laid a hand on his shoulder and said kindly:

'You see, my dear boy, the most important thing, when one starts on a piece of work, is to think it over carefully. Thoroughly to understand one's task is more than half the battle. That is what I want to get firmly into your head. I shall succeed in the end. I shall spare no pains. From now on we will do all your essays together.'

Legend of Poldevia

In the town of Cstwertskst there lived an old lady named Marichella Borboia who had justly acquired a high reputation for piety and virginity. She heard Mass at least once a day, communicated twice a week, was generous in her gifts to the clergy, embroidered altar-cloths and distributed alms to the more deserving poor. Clad in black on all occasions, never addressing herself to a man except in circumstances of extreme necessity and always with lowered eyes, she provoked none of those vile thoughts which lead to the sin of lust, and for her own part had no knowledge of them. Finally, as though to enable her to fulfil herself in perfection, God had visited her with a great and grievous affliction, which appeared, such is the miracle of a fervent heart, only to fortify her piety.

With the most tender, watchful care, Mlle Borboia had supervised the upbringing of an orphaned nephew named Bobislas. In her simplicity, and trusting to the reputation of those responsible for the conduct of the establishment, the old lady had confided this agreeable and promising child, whom she intended to follow the calling of notary, to the National High School, where his morals were speedily corrupted. His year of philosophical study, as happens all too often to those placed under the guidance of atheists, had proved especially disastrous. What he learned of the mechanism of the human

passions served only to enslave him the more readily to his own, and taught him to profit by the passions of others. He took to smoking, drinking and staring at women with eyes gleaming with an evil concupiscence. Since he never looked at his aunt in this particular way, and when in his cups was sufficiently light-hearted to make his state appear to be one of natural gaiety, the old lady never dreamed that her nephew was heading for perdition. When he left High School, Bobislas was articled to a notary in Cstwertskst, and it was while he was serving his term that his infamy was made manifest. One afternoon when the notary was out, Bobislas rifled his cashbox and ravished his wife and his two maidservants, subsequently compelling them to accompany him to the cellar and there steep themselves with him in vodka and sundry wines. Fortunately the notary's daughters were away from home that day, but the damage was none the less appreciable. The robbed and outraged husband turned his clerk out of the house and complained to Mlle Borboia.

The old lady, her heart rent with horror at this revelation of depravity at so early an age, made of her anguish an offering to God and gallantly strove to lead her nephew back to the path of virtue. The effort was in vain. After essaying a dozen different callings and failing to persevere in any, the wretched youth went from bad to worse. The town of Cstwertskst resounded with the tales of his unbridled behaviour, his orgies, his brawls, the girls and married women upon whom he had brought shame and disaster, not to mention the loose women with whom he habitually consorted. For five years Mlle Borboia persisted in the hope that eventually he would mend his ways, showering on him, meanwhile, good advice and pious exhortations, together with all the money he required to enable them to bear fruit. But at last she realised that her generosity was serving only to maintain her nephew in sin, and that she must leave it to the

teaching of necessity to reawaken in him a sense of duty. One evening when he came to her asking for money she had the courage to say no.

Such was the state of affairs when war broke out. For many years the Poldevians had been on bad terms with their neighbours, the Molletonians. Fresh disputes were of almost daily occurrence between the two great nations, and their prospect of ever reaching agreement was the less inasmuch as both sides were invariably in the right. The state of tension was already acute when a serious incident brought matters to a head. A little Molletonian boy deliberately, and with a sarcastic smile, pissed across the frontier, sprinkling the soil of Poldevia. This affront to the national honour caused an instant upstirring of the Poldevian conscience, and mobilisation was promptly decreed.

Great was the activity in the town of Cstwertskst. The men were called up to defend the nation in peril, and the women all took to knitting. Mlle Borboia distinguished herself with a flow of garments as close-knit as they were abundant, and it was she who caused the largest candles to be burnt in church for the victory of Poldevian arms. Bobislas, then approaching his twenty-eighth year, had enlisted in the Hussar regiment stationed on garrison duty in the town. Peacocking in his gold-braided uniform, with his busby on his head and four feet of sabre swinging against his calf, he at once acquired an exaggerated notion both of his own importance and of his prerogatives as one of the nation's glorious defenders. His audacity and insolence thenceforth knew no bounds. While he awaited the summons to battle, the war for him was nothing but a series of brawls and debauches; and arguing that he was soon to shed his blood on behalf of the civil populace, he made ever more exorbitant demands upon them. There was not a woman or unmarried girl in the town whom he hesitated to assail with eyes and hands, harassing and pursuing them even into the church or

their own homes, dipping shamelessly into the purses of terrified fathers and husbands and at a pinch holding people in the street to ransom on the pretext of persuading them to make voluntary contributions to the national defence. Mlle Borboia, who had hitherto retained a remnant of affection for the abominable young man, now began to hate him with that ardour and intensity of which virtue alone is capable when confronted with the embodiment of the uttermost vice. This abhorrence, which she held to be among her most sacred duties, did not prevent the drunken monster from calling upon her. A string of vile oaths would herald his approach as he swaggered along the street. Swaying as he stood, his great sabre banging about and getting caught in the furniture, belching and bellowing, with no greeting other than a blasphemy, he would announce that she had better produce her money and look sharp about it. On several occasions when she was slow to obey he went so far as to half-unsheath his weapon, threatening to divide the saintly old body in two portions, in the vertical sense.

Finally, after six months of this barbarous and cut-throat existence, Bobislas was loaded into a railway truck with his horse and taken to the front. A huge sigh of relief went up from the town of Cstwertskst, the joy of the worthy citizens being so great that a particularly favourable war communiqué, issued on the day of his departure, went quite unnoticed. As for Mlle Borboia, she seemed to be born into a new life of sweetness and light. She recovered the accents of childhood when saying her prayers and heard the flutter of seraphic wings in her dreams.

Bobislas had been gone six months, and varying fortunes had attended the Poldevian arms, when the town of Cstwertskst was ravaged by an influenza epidemic. Among the first to be afflicted was Mlle Borboia, and with a perfect serenity she awaited the coming of death. Having made a will in favour of

the most deserving local charities she died at five in the morning with the name of her creator on her lips, and when the news became known in the town it was generally agreed that she would sup that evening with the angels in Paradise.

* * *

When she reached the Gates of Heaven, Mlle Borboia found herself confronted by a strange spectacle which at first she did not understand. The roads leading to the radiant portals were filled with columns of soldiers marching noisily between two rows of civilians, lying or seated on the grass verges, who gazed at the military with eyes of sombre disillusion. Mlle Borboia was tripping along without misgiving at the side of one of the columns when she heard her name called. Looking round she recognised, among the civilians seated by the roadside, the notary whose wife Bobislas had dishonoured. This gentleman, who had predeceased her by a fortnight, came forward to greet her and with a smile of good-humoured irony asked her where she was going in such a hurry.

'I am going,' said she, 'to render my account.'

'Alas,' sighed the notary, 'the time for us to render our accounts is still a long way off.'

'That may be your opinion, but I should very much like to know why anyone should refuse me – '

'It is very simple, and if you look about you you will see why. Since war first began to rage along the frontiers of Poldevia there has been no room here for anyone but soldiers. They're marching into Heaven in column of fours, without having to undergo even the most trifling examination, and regardless of what sins they may have committed.'

'Can that possibly be true?' murmured the old lady. 'But it would be terrible!'

'On the contrary, nothing could be more proper. Those who

die in a sacred cause deserve well of Heaven. That is precisely what has happened in the case of the Poldevian soldiers, who by fighting for the right have enlisted God on their side. But it applies equally to the Molletonian soldiers. Although they did not mention it to us down below, God is on their side as well. So there are a lot of new arrivals up here. And since on both sides the morale of the troops is excellent, and the generals are displaying unparalleled genius, it is to be feared that the war will go on for a long time. We civilians cannot expect any attention until it is over, and even then we shall have to count ourselves lucky if our papers have not been lost in the confusion.'

Mlle Borboia was at first greatly downcast by the notary's disclosure, but upon reflection she doubted its truth. Although he had been a worthy man enough during his lifetime, he had never displayed any especial zeal in religious matters, and had moreover acquired a reputation for being as miserly as he was gluttonous, which in itself was more than enough to damn his soul.

The soldiers, mounted and on foot, were pouring through the splendid gateway, of which the widespread approaches took the form of a magnificent esplanade. Seated on a cloud overlooking the gates, St Peter was supervising the entry of the troops and keeping count. Mlle Borboia, with the unconcern born of a clear conscience, walked boldly as far as the middle of the esplanade. Here an archangel came to meet her and said to her in a voice of infinite suavity that was like a foreshadowing of the music of Paradise:

'Old lady, you must turn back. Surely you know that civilians are not allowed on the esplanade.'

'Doubtless, most noble angel, you do not know who I am. I am Mlle Borboia of Cstwerskst. I am sixty-eight years of age and still a virgin, and I have lived all my life in the love and

fear of the holy name of God. My parish priest, who was the director of my conscience . . .'

While thus setting forth her claims to the indulgence of the tribunal she continued to advance, despite the protests of the archangel, who sought in vain to prevent her.

'But now that I have explained to you that the esplanade – '

'. . . prayers first thing every morning, Mass in all weathers, after Mass a special invocation to St Joseph and thanksgiving to the Holy Virgin, beads at ten followed by a chapter of the Gospel, Benedicite at midday . . .'

Despite his instructions the archangel could not prevent himself from listening. To those celestial beings nothing is more delightful and absorbing than the enumeration of the merits and good works of a devout old maid. The passionate interest which we on earth may find in the romances of a Dumas can afford but the feeblest indication of the shiver of delicious ecstasy that overtakes them as they listen to the recital of those countless small daily strivings towards the good.

'Listen,' said the archangel, 'your case appears to me an exceptional one. I will see what I can do for you.'

He led Mlle Borboia to the foot of the cloud on which St Peter was enthroned, and springing aloft with a single motion of his wings whispered in the right ear of the glorious Keeper of the Keys, who listened attentively but without taking his eyes off the procession of soldiers.

The matter was practically decided, he was about to waive the regulations in Mlle Borboia's favour, when another angel drew close to his left ear and informed him that the grand spring offensive had opened on the Poldevian front. St Peter made a sweeping gesture, seeming to dispose of all the civilians in creation, and at once began to issue orders in a loud voice.

Driven back among the civilians at the side of the road along which she had come, Mlle Borboia, a prey to indescribable

anguish, now found herself pushing past the advancing mass of troops, which was already growing denser. Infantrymen, sappers, light cavalry, dragoons and artillerymen were marching still with some degree of discipline, but with the different arms sometimes intermingled and to the accompaniment of a loud tumult of voices. While their N.C.O.s barked orders the soldiers sang, shouted insults from man to man and formation to formation, jeered at the civilians, jested with the women and bellowed in unison those obscene ditties which are a part of the heroic tradition. Occasionally a blockage delayed the progress of the endless column. The ranks closed up, and confusion and impatience gave rise to storms of invective, artillerymen abusing infantrymen, who in their turn rounded upon the dragoons or the grenadiers. Deafened by this hubbub, Mlle Borboia came near to believing that she was already in Hell. She walked despondently along the edge of the road, as often as not in the ditch, searching among the crowd of apathetic civilians for the notary from Cstwertskst or some other acquaintance whose company might be a solace to her in this hour of trial. Several times infamous ditties assailed her at point-blank range, bellowed from a hundred throats. At length, exhausted and in despair, she sat down at the edge of the ditch, her face bathed in tears.

A stoppage higher up the column caused a squadron of hussars to remain stationary at the point where she was seated. Leading the troop was an elderly, white-moustached captain who proudly carried his head under his arm, surmounted by its busby, while he soothed his agitated mount. Exasperated by the prolonged delay, he set his head on the point of his sword and raised it at arm's length in order to see what was going on. And suddenly a ringing cry of indignation attracted Mlle Borboia's notice.

'Thunder of Cstwertskst!' bawled the captain. 'It's those

bloody supply-wallahs who are holding us up! I might have known it! Those clods! They ride like blasted footsloggers! God dammit, are they letting supply-wallahs into Heaven? Why not gas-inspectors? Ten thousand thunders of Cstwertskst!'

All the hussars behind him rose in their stirrups and shouted:

'It's the muckin' fetch-and-carry boys holdin' up the works as usual, afraid of gettin' their ruddy feet wet! Clear the muckers out of the way! Clear 'em out!'

And with their voices thus in harmony they went on to sing a paean to the glory of the regiment which began:

'When from another victory
Her bold Hussars ride home to Cstwertskst,
The streets as far as eye can see
Are lined with wildly waving skirts . . .'

Mlle Borboia could no longer doubt that she had before her the hussars of the Cstwertskst garrison. Indeed, she recognised the white-moustached captain from having often seen him trailing his sabre along the pavements of the town. He was positively known to have a mistress, a woman of loose morals for whom he bought furs and silk dresses, and she shivered at the thought that the Heavenly portals now stood open to such a man. Looking along the ranks she saw a number of familiar faces, among them that of a young ensign, pretty as a girl. He favoured the company of young men like himself, and things were said about him which she did not understand but which she guessed to be suspect, since ladies lowered their voices when referring to them. Nevertheless he too was headed straight for Paradise.

And then, as Mlle Borboia's survey reached the rearmost

files, a cry of stupefaction rose to her lips. In the horseman riding at the tail of the squadron she had recognised her infamous nephew, Bobislas. A movement of protest brought her to her feet at the edge of the ditch. To this heartless and conscienceless villain, this rogue, this cynical profligate addicted to the most squalid vices, the glory of Paradise was offered without discussion, whereas she might have to wait for years at the gates and perhaps be refused admission in the end. As she considered her modest, old-maid's life, her prayers and her good works, the impulse of revolt that had filled her heart gave way to a sense of profound discouragement that seemed to leave no room for hope. In the meantime Bobislas had recognised her, and he spurred his horse to the side of the road.

'Well, if it isn't the old faggot!' he exclaimed. 'Talk about a small world!'

The term 'old faggot' is a Poldevian expression designating old age in a disrespectful and denigratory sense, and on the lips of Bobislas it contained more than a hint of rancour.

'Queer that we should both have had our chips at the same time,' he went on. 'But as you see, I haven't done as badly as you expected. In fact, my future looks pretty all right, which is more than you can say, from what they tell me.'

The cruelty of this jibe was more than Mlle Borboia could bear, and she hid her face in her hands and wept. Bobislas was moved to pity and said kindly:

'Don't cry, old girl. I'm not such a bad lot as I look. I'll get you in. Hop up behind.'

She did not understand, and so, as the column was about to move on, he reached down and lifted her up behind him, seating her astride his horse.

'Put your arms round my waist and hang on tight, and never mind about showing your legs, the sight of them won't blind anyone. Well now, and what's new in Cstwertskst?'

'The notary is dead. I saw him a little while ago at the side of the road.'

'Poor devil. I had his wife, as you may remember.'

Mlle Borboia, in great discomfort, was wondering whether she should not ask Bobislas to put her down. It was a strange thing indeed for an old maiden lady, fortified with all the sacraments of the Church, to be riding on the crupper of a hussar's horse surrounded by a pack of drunken soldiery who laughed to see her in such a posture. But this was by no means the worst of it. When one has behind one a whole lifetime of striving for Christian perfection, it is mortifying in the extreme to owe one's salvation to a villain steeped in the blackest sins. And it is no less shameful to be obliged to admit that one is entering Heaven by means of trickery and artifice.

'If you don't get copped you can't be stopped,' said Bobislas. 'Hang on tight.'

'The ways of Providence are inscrutable,' reflected Mlle Borboia with a touch of hypocrisy. The horses were moving at a walk, and there were frequent pauses to prolong her torment. At length the squadron emerged on to the esplanade opposite the golden gates. Celestial trumpets played the march of the Cstwertskst Hussars, and the leading files passed under the archway. Enthroned on his cloud, St Peter watched with a vigilant eye.

'Make yourself as small as you can,' whispered Bobislas.

The advice was unnecessary. In her black attire, and shrunken with shame and apprehension, Mlle Borboia was like a bundle of old clothes tied to the back of the horse. But just as they reached the gateway and were about to pass through, a powerful voice from the cloud brought them to a stop.

'Hey, you there, wait a minute!' called St Peter. 'What's that woman you've got riding behind you?'

Relaxing her grasp in her terror, Mlle Borboia came very

near to falling off. Bobislas, however, rose in his stirrups, and turning to St Peter with a casual inclination of his busby, said in a male voice brimming with assurance:

'It's the regimental slattern, your Honour.'

'Oh, I see. Very well.'

Mlle Borboia swallowed this supreme humiliation with a sob; but an instant later she had quite forgotten it, for she had entered the Kingdom of Heaven, where whys and wherefors no longer mean anything at all.

The Walking-Stick

THE Sorbiers having decided to take advantage of the fine Sunday afternoon to go for a walk, Mme Sorbier called out of the window to her two sons, Victor and Félicien, who were amusing themselves in the street by throwing dirt in each other's face. They had a fondness for the sort of rowdy games that are the despair of mothers.

'Come and change into clean clothes. We're going for a walk. It's a lovely afternoon.'

They all put on their Sunday best, Victor and Félicien scrambling into their sailor-suits with unconcealed dislike. Both boys longed for grown-up clothes, but for these they would have to wait until their first communion, when they would also get real silver watches.

Their father carefully adjusted the bow tie in his starched collar. As he was putting on his jacket he looked glumly at the left sleeve and said to his wife:

'Would you mind very much, Mathilde, if I took off the *crêpe* armband? People don't often wear mourning in Paris.'

'Just as you please,' said Mathilde in a wounded voice. 'It's barely two months since Uncle Émile died, but after all he was only my uncle, and it doesn't take you long to forget people.'

'But you know what he used to say – "When I'm dead, my children, I don't want you to – " '

'Of course you're not bound to show respect for my relations, but you've got to admit that I've always worn mourning for yours. I've scarcely ever been out of black in all the eight years we've been married.'

Sorbier wagged his head vexedly, having no answer to this. He put on his jacket without removing the armband and without feeling the glow of conscious rectitude that an act of self-sacrifice is supposed to procure. Gloomily contemplating his reflection in the wardrobe-mirror he muttered:

'It's the way it stands out. If this were a dark jacket it wouldn't be so bad.'

Sorbier was not excessively vain. He was content, during the week, to wear old and even patched clothes at the office; but he considered, and rightly, that Sunday was a day for dressing with elegance. How, after all, is a man to bear with the tyranny of his boss if he is not conscious of having a Sunday suit at home? It is a matter of human dignity. And obviously a *crêpe* armband detracts from the smartness of a suit. But then on the other hand mourning is mourning, no getting away from it, particularly when one is married and the father of a family.

Victor and Félicien meanwhile were playing touch-you-last under the dining-room table, although they had been warned that this was not a game for indoors. A vase crashed to the floor. Their mother rushed out, slapped the boy who was nearest and locked the other in the lavatory to keep them apart. She could then get on with her dressing in peace, without the risk of further disasters. Returning to the bedroom she found her husband seated in an armchair and stroking his toothbrush moustache while he gazed beatifically at the ceiling.

'What are you staring at? What are you thinking about, and why are you grinning like that?'

'I've just had an idea, Mathilde. It has just suddenly come to me. What I want . . .'

He talked like a man seeing visions, and his wife, at once suspecting some new folly, insisted on hearing what he had to say.

'What I want,' he said, 'is to take Uncle Émile's walking-stick. You know, it never occurred to me before, but don't you think the stick might be put to some use, instead of just being kept in the wardrobe?'

Mathilde pursed her lips and he himself blushed a little, realising that he was perhaps being somewhat hasty in this matter of the walking-stick, with Uncle Émile scarcely cold in his grave – a fact of which his wife in a furious voice, her eyes damp with indignation, proceeded to remind him.

'Barely two months! A man who worked hard all his life. Why, he never once used that stick!'

'Exactly.'

'What do you mean, exactly? Why do you say that? Where's the sense in saying exactly?'

'All I say is – exactly.' And Sorbier assumed an enigmatic expression, as though the word had some unfathomable meaning.

Mathilde demanded further explanation but he merely whistled between his teeth in a manner which caused her, as she fastened her suspenders, to meditate reprisals. At half-past two they were all assembled on the landing. It looked as though this was going to be just another of those Sunday outings; two hours of tedious walking followed by a rest period during which they would sit in silence round a café table. 'Come along, you young devils,' said Sorbier, and this also was routine. But as he was in the act of closing the door of the apartment a thought seemed to strike him, and he said with an air of innocence that deceived his wife:

'I've forgotten my watch. You go on down and I'll catch you up.'

Hurrying to the wardrobe he got out Uncle Émile's walking-stick. The yellow bone knob, carved in the shape of a bulldog's head, was fixed to a stem of varnished wood with a gold band. It had never occurred to Sorbier that the mere fact of carrying a stick in his right hand sufficed to give a man a greater sense of his own importance. His wife's furious protest, when he rejoined his family outside the house, left him unmoved. With the firmness of a free man and paterfamilias resolved to defend the privilege proper to his status he replied:

'Quite so. I've taken your uncle's stick. I see no reason why not. I'm thirty-seven, an age when a man in a responsible position is entitled to carry a walking-stick. If you insist on keeping this one in the wardrobe I'll buy myself one, and I promise you it won't be anything cheap and nasty.'

Mathilde was constrained to silence, fearing that this might be the thin end of the wedge. A man starts by buying a walking-stick and Heaven knows what may follow – extravagant habits, mistresses . . . For the first time in years she glanced at her husband in a manner that was half apprehensive and half admiring. Although she still deplored his lack of respect for the deceased, she could not help observing the fashionable ease with which he flourished the stick. She gave a sigh that was almost tender, but which he mistook for one of indignation.

'If your feet are hurting you,' he said, 'you'd better go home. I'll carry on with the children. They won't mind.'

'There's nothing the matter with my feet. But why do you say that the children . . . ?'

'Do you think I'm incapable of taking my sons for a walk? What you're implying, I suppose, is that I'm a bad father.'

Sorbier laughed sardonically. Victor was walking a few paces ahead of them, but Félicien's hand was clasped in his mother's

and she was keeping a tight hold on it. Observing this and feeling the need for a crushing display of authority, Sorbier said:

'I can't think why you don't allow the boys to amuse themselves on their own. Félicien, let go of your mother's hand.'

'You know what it's like when they go off together,' objected Mathilde. 'They get quite out of control. They're certain to tear their clothes, even if they don't get themselves run over, and then when the accident's happened it's too late.'

Sorbier ignored this. Giving Félicien a friendly tap on the calves with the stick he said:

'Go on in front with your brother. That's more fun than clinging to your mother's apron-strings.'

Félicien let go his mother's hand and caught his brother unawares with a kick on the backside to which Victor replied with a clout that knocked his beret on to the pavement. Mathilde watched this outcome of the paternal decree with an affectation of indifference that was not untinged with sarcasm. Sorbier laughed and said good-humouredly:

'They're a terrible pair, but still it's wrong not to let them enjoy themselves in their own way.'

However, he conceded the necessity of keeping their enjoyment within bounds.

'You're to stay close in front of us, within reach of my stick, and behave properly. We've made an early start so I'm going to take you for a particularly nice walk. You'll have a chance to improve your minds.'

* * *

The family walked for the better part of a mile along streets and boulevards with the father using his stick to point out objects of interest, and discoursing with an abundance and urbanity that infuriated his wife.

'There are a great many historic monuments round here. The

Louvre, for instance – and over there you have the magasins du Louvre, a famous department store . . . That's the Ministry of Finance . . . And here's the statue of Gambetta, the man who saved the nation's honour in 1870 . . . Mind you don't forget that.'

They had reached the Tuileries garden, and a little further on Victor pointed to the statue of a naked woman standing on a pedestal.

'What about her, papa? Who's she? Did she save the nation's honour too?'

His father, rather put out, said sharply:

'She's just a woman. You don't have to stand there gaping.'

He prodded Victor with the stick, feeling shocked that a child of his age should be asking questions about a naked woman; but recovering almost instantly from this moment of vexation he nudged his wife and remarked in a tone in which the hint of mockery was scarcely disguised:

'It must be said, she's remarkably well-shaped. The sculptor was a real artist, don't you think?'

Conscious of the imperfections contained with difficulty within her corset, Mathilde looked at him in pained reproach; and he made things worse by giving a libidinous click of his tongue.

'Remarkably well-shaped, you must admit. Really it is hard to imagine a more beautiful body.'

Mathilde replied with a confused murmur which was less a contradiction than a shamefaced protest, and its effect on Sorbier was to cause him to bridle as though he had been accused of hypocrisy. He felt that the unique dignity conferred upon him by Uncle Émile's walking-stick was compromised by this suggestion of bad faith. Taking Mathilde by the arm he thrust her within a foot of the statue.

'Look at the line of the hip and the curve of the belly, just a very slight curve, exactly the amount a belly ought to have. And look at those breasts, so firm and deliciously rounded! Did you ever see more beautiful breasts?'

Mathilde was nearly in tears. Victor and Félicien were following their father's discourse with the greatest interest and as he stroked the curves with the tip of his stick they clutched each other in an effort not to giggle. Mathilde attempted to change the subject, even going so far as to suggest that this kind of lecture was scarcely suited to young ears. But Sorbier, by now carried away, spared her nothing. Going round to the other side of the statue he uttered a positive bellow of enthusiasm.

'And the back view's just as good! Just exactly enough to sit down on and no more!'

The stick described two circles outlining the objects of his admiration, and this drew from Victor and Félicien, who were already pink with suppressed merriment, a snort of half-stifled laughter. Fearing lest the outburst should cause their parents to suspect them of depraved instincts they turned and ran off, and this induced Sorbier to leave the statue.

Mathilde had heard him out to the end, without even thinking of turning her back on him. She fell into step automatically at his side, her mind filled with the picture of that desolatingly flawless nudity. Considering her own bosom, whose amplitude prevented her from seeing her feet, she found herself blushing and in an access of humility she reflected that she was ridiculous and unworthy of this husband whom she had underestimated. Sorbier had acquired a new stature in her eyes, becoming suddenly a demon of seduction, bathed in a glow of perversity. She discovered in herself an unfamiliar sense of devotion, a hankering after subservience and total submission to the tyrant's lightest whim. But she allowed no sign of this sentimental upheaval to escape her. Bearing herself aloofly and

with a pursed expression she maintained a wary silence, leaving it to him to keep the children in order; and with an effort that made her red in the face she drew in her ample stomach, not reflecting that this made her bosom even more prominent. In any case, Sorbier was paying no attention to her. Exalted by his inspired commentary on that stony nakedness he was repeating certain phrases which he thought particularly well-chosen, while in his mind's eye he evoked the figure in detail. Mutterings escaped him concerning legs, neck and shoulders which might have had reference to a cooking recipe, but then with a gasp of excited laughter he exclaimed, 'And the breasts! Upon my word, those breasts!' It had already been apparent that his interest in the statue was not purely aesthetic; and now a gleam had crept into his eye and a tremor into his voice, portents not unknown to his wife. She could no longer remain aloof. Speaking in a low voice, with a trace of bitterness but without anger, she said:

'Perhaps you've been hiding it, but you've certainly never talked to me like this before. Taking Uncle Émile's stick seems to have had a strange effect on you. If my poor uncle were still alive he'd remind you of the duties of a husband and father. He'd tell you that it's not decent or sensible to talk to your wife about another female's breasts, even a stone one. You know what happens to a marriage when the husband goes off the rails – look at the Corvisons, and that's only one example. And anyway what good does it do? What's the use of dreaming about someone else's breasts? Think of our own nights together, darling – there was only one pair of breasts for you. Even last night – you surely can't have forgotten . . .'

Directly she had said it she realised her mistake. In a moment of jealous tenderness she had rashly drawn attention to her own bosom; and Sorbier, not content with the satisfactions of an imaginary debauch, now indulged in those of cruelty and

callousness. His eye rested upon her in derisive pity, the stick described an exaggerated outline and he wagged his head in a manner which said all too plainly, 'My poor dear, you simply can't compete. Just look at yourself.'

The message was so unmistakable that Mathilde reddened with fury. She proceeded to counter-attack.

'Not that I care in the least. It's the children I'm thinking of, and you, too, because you don't seem to realise what a fool you're making of yourself, playing at being the gay Lothario. After all, you're not exactly in the first flush of youth. The concierge said as much to me only yesterday, when I came in after buying a bandage for your varicose veins.'

'Did she indeed? That old slut who's twice tried to kiss me on the stairs! As I said to her, "Any time I want to be unfaithful to my wife I know where to go. There's no shortage of pretty girls in Paris. With a little know-how – "' (and here Sorbier smiled a meaningful smile) '" – a man can pick and choose, thank Heaven."'

As it happened a good-looking young woman was passing at that moment, and for an instant her eyes met those of Sorbier. On a sudden impulse he raised his hat and gave her the most cavalier of smiles. Somewhat startled, she nodded and even smiled faintly in return. Mathilde felt that she was losing her wits. She seized her husband by the arm.

'Who was that? Who was that woman? I've never seen her in my life. Where did you meet her?'

Sorbier was silent as though reluctant to answer, but when she persisted he said in a tone of feigned embarrassment:

'I'm really not sure. I knew her at one time. I don't exactly remember.'

Delighted by Mathilde's agitation he hurried away to tell Félicien to come off the grass.

* * *

Leaving the Tuileries gardens the family walked back to the boulevards by way of the Rue Royale. As they passed a pastry-shop Félicien announced that he was hungry and Victor at once took up the tale.

'I'm hungry too, Mamma. I'm much hungrier than Félicien.'

Mathilde in her irritation slapped them both and they began to blubber. Mathilde's own eyes were red and swollen. The passers-by glanced pityingly at this unhappy mother, struggling with two tearful children, but Sorbier took no notice. He was striding ahead, cheeks pink and eyes alert, pausing only to glance now and then at a female form. At the *terrasse* of one of the boulevard cafés he paused and waited for them to come up with him.

'We may as well stop and have something,' he said. 'The walk's made me thirsty. And besides, we can watch the world go by, all the women . . .'

Mathilde glanced apprehensively at the establishment, which was a place of padded armchairs, tall mirrors, spick-and-span waiters and a lordly majordomo. As a rule their Sunday outings ended in some back-street café smelling of sawdust and wine by the glass – a cosy little nook, as Sorbier was apt to call it, where the *patron* himself served the beer. This display of luxury, with its promise of terrifyingly high prices, confirmed her in her suspicion that her husband was embarked on a slippery slope. He was already propelling her towards it in a manner which he attempted to make casual, but she held back.

'We never go to places like this. You know we don't.'

'It's just a café like any other. One would think you'd never been anywhere. Good Lord, I've been coming to this place for years!'

'If it were just the two of us . . .' Mathilde said humbly. 'I

mean, that would be different. Perhaps some other time . . .'

But Sorbier was now growing impatient, feeling that the people seated at the tables were amused by his wife's awkwardness.

'You can do as you please,' he said. 'Take the children home, if you'd rather. Personally, I'm going to have a drink.'

He strode between the rows of tables without waiting for an answer, and the family followed. A couple were in the act of leaving a table at the back of the *terrasse* and he at once took possession of it. He ordered an apéritif for himself and beer for the children. Mathilde preferred not to take anything, saying that she had a headache. Husband and wife sat in oppressed silence on their padded chairs. Sorbier himself was rendered uncomfortable by the thought of the impression his family might be making on this public of well-to-do idlers. More than once, it seemed to him, the waiter gave him a disapproving glance. He said to Mathilde:

'Do for Heaven's sake take something. You look so silly. One doesn't come to a café not to drink anything, it's absurd.'

Mathilde finally gave way and said she would have a small beer, and this so relieved Sorbier that his good humour was restored. Remembering that he was carrying a walking-stick he fell to admiring the carved knob.

'No getting away from it, a stick does do something for a man. I don't know why I've never thought of it before.'

The words were addressed in an amiable tone to Mathilde, and she responded with a burst of grateful affection.

'It's quite true. I never dreamed a stick would suit you so well. I'm glad you brought it.'

At this moment a woman approached the *terrasse* whose profession was sufficiently obvious from her attire, her make-up and the appraising glance she bestowed on the male customers. She stood hesitating amid the rows of tables, and seeing a free

one not far from the Sorbier family sat down at it. Sorbier had been watching her from the moment she appeared, and when she was seated he had no difficulty in catching her eye. Glances and faint smiles were exchanged, the shameless creature responding the more readily since she was evidently under the impression, from Sorbier's ease of manner, that Mathilde was not his wife. Leaning forward over his glass the better to see her, Sorbier's becks and nods became increasingly demonstrative. Mathilde could not fail to notice what was going on, but, choked with indignation and not wishing to make a scene in public, she said nothing until Victor and Félicien, wondering whom their father was smiling at, also turned to stare at the new arrival. She then burst out furiously:

'Really, it's revolting! In front of the children! A woman like that!'

The *terrasse* of the café was now so crowded that the waiters were being run off their feet and the woman was unable to get served. Seeing the offhand manner in which she was being treated by the personnel of the establishment Sorbier at first manifested his displeasure by gestures, and then, despite Mathilde's effort to restrain him, exclaimed in a voice calculated to reach her ears:

'Really the service here is disgraceful! The place has gone to the dogs. When I think what it used to be like!'

The lady flashed him a smile of gratitude which thrilled him to the core. In order to justify his proceedings to his wife, and being himself now carried away on a tide of high living that appalled her, he added:

'I've been trying for a quarter of an hour to get the waiter to bring me a cocktail.'

The word 'cocktail', with its depraved and dissolute associations – naked women and vintage wines – completed Mathilde's disarray. She had a vision of her husband squandering

the family savings on taxis, opera-hats and night-clubs while she pawned the last of her jewels to feed her starving young.

'*Garçon*, you're wanted over here! It's outrageous that one can't get hold of a waiter!'

Sorbier's bellow was lost in the general hubbub, but the lady gave him another look of gratitude and shared indignation. In an access of zeal and chivalry Sorbier grasped his walking-stick by the middle, meaning to bang on the table with it, and raised it vigorously over his shoulder . . .

And the mirror behind him burst into fragments, shattered by Uncle Émile's bulldog head. Sorbier sprang to his feet, scarlet with embarrassment, while laughter exploded around him, derisive comment and the indignant protests of a gentleman at the next table who said that pieces of glass had fallen into his apéritif. In his consternation he stood clutching the stick with both hands like a soldier presenting arms.

Seeing her husband thus crestfallen Mathilde, from being plunged in despair, was suddenly brought back to life. Her maligned bosom recovered its authority. Half rising from her chair and with a venomous smile, careless of the hilarity her words provoked among the witnesses of the drama, she said shrilly:

'Five hundred francs! That's what your idiocy is going to cost – and all for a slut of a woman who's only after your money!'

The manager came running to the scene of the disaster and a waiter fetched a policeman. Sorbier gave his name and address and produced his identity-card. Aged and shrunken he stammered out excuses:

'I assure you it was entirely accidental . . . It was Uncle Émile's stick . . . I only wanted to signal to the waiter . . .'

Mathilde was delightedly following the proceedings, inter-

jecting sarcasms of her own. Bowing beneath the storm he could only say beseechingly:

'Please, Mathilde – not now.'

The policeman, touched by his suffering, cut the formalities short. Even the manager was sufficiently moved by compassion to say that the damage was not serious and no doubt he would be able to arrange matters with the insurance company. But Sorbier was still in great distress as he resumed his seat beside Mathilde, who promptly asked:

'Don't you think you'd better have a cocktail to help you pull yourself together. I'm sure you need something.'

So afflicted was his countenance, so humble his posture, that she felt free to visit every torment upon him.

'And now you're feeling so rich,' she went on, 'you really ought to have a cocktail. You can give me a sip.'

Sorbier sighed deeply and stared in the direction of the young woman who had been the cause of all the trouble, hoping for at least a glance of sympathy. But the wanton creature, finding the spell broken, now had her back to him and was returning the ardent gaze of an old gentleman at another table.

'There you are,' said Mathilde. 'There's your trollop. She's found someone who needs *two* walking-sticks!'

Victor and Félicien, with a cruelty that was not altogether unintentional, were blithely re-enacting the episode, and their mother went so far as to encourage their charade, reminding them of details they had overlooked. In a voice of misery Sorbier called to the waiter and paid the bill. But when finally he started to leave, Mathilde, still lounging in her chair, called him back and said with intolerable sweetness:

'Darling, you're forgetting your stick.'

He returned and, awkwardly retrieving it, followed her out as she herded the boys between the rows of drinkers. The stick

was now an encumbrance to him, and passing a table he knocked over an empty glass which a waiter skilfully caught before it hit the ground. Mathilde said derisively over her shoulder:

'There's no holding you today, is there? Are you sure there's nothing else you'd like to break?'

At that moment he dearly longed to break the stick over his wife's head, but it was a passing thought to which he dared not give expression. As they left the *terrasse* he had the added bitterness of seeing the young woman rise and join the old gentleman at his table. Mathilde, whom nothing escaped, did not fail to point out the irony of this development, but she was now so filled with the need for revenge that mere humour was not enough. Looking squarely at her husband she said in the commanding voice with which he was all too familiar:

'And now I'd like you to tell me the real reason why you took that stick, when it doesn't even belong to you.'

Sorbier made a vague gesture. He no longer knew. Mathilde could have hit him.

'One doesn't do a thing like that for no reason at all. I insist on knowing why you took Uncle Émile's stick.'

She had stopped and was holding him by the lapel of his jacket. Sorbier realised that she would give him no peace until he had furnished an explanation. After peering honourably into the recesses of his soul, and finding nothing, he decided to fall back on poetry in the hope that this would appease her wrath.

'Well, really, it's not easy to put into words. It was – well, it was the sunshine, you see, such a lovely day – the feeling of spring – you know how it is, one gets these ideas in the spring . . .'

At this she affected to be convulsed with laughter, and he repeated pathetically:

'Yes, that's what it was – the feeling of spring. If only you could understand . . .'

She gave him a push to start him moving again, as though he were now no more than an automaton, and said with tight lips:

'You wait till I get you home, my lad. I'll teach you about the spring. You needn't think you're forgiven.'

The boys had taken advantage of this interlude to run on ahead, and they had to hurry amid the crowd of strollers to overtake them. Mathilde said to Victor:

'You're to take your father's hand, and mind he doesn't let go of you.'

Sorbier submissively took his son by the hand and was walking on when she stopped him.

'Your right hand, silly, you know he's got a sore thumb. It's no use fussing about the stick, you'll just have to carry it in your left hand. You won't look any more ridiculous than you do already.'

Accordingly he transferred the stick to his left hand and the child to his right. The stick was worrying him more and more; he tucked it under his arm, and his air of discomfort drew further derisive remarks from Mathilde. As he was about to turn the corner to the right she said in a calm voice that filled him with apprehension:

'No, keep straight on. I don't want to go that way.'

'But it's getting late. Do you realise it's nearly five?'

'Why are you suddenly in such a hurry? I'm feeling like a bit more exercise. We'll go back along the Rue Royale and through the Tuileries. It's the nicest of all walks at this time of year.'

She had been planning this revenge ever since they left the café – to take her crushed and abject husband home by way of the paths he had so arrogantly trodden a couple of hours before.

Sorbier was now dragging his feet, head bowed and shoulders drooping, no longer interested in looking at the women; and Mathilde, following close on his heels, neglected no opportunity of emphasising the contrast between the then and the now.

'Now that's a pretty girl! Do you mean to say you didn't notice? I thought you'd have been bound to give her a look.'

Back in the Tuileries garden Victor and Félicien were allowed to run off by themselves, but Sorbier did not take advantage of the fact to transfer the stick to his right hand. He was doing his best to forget it. Mathilde, exactly recalling the places which had been the scene of his declaration of independence and his libertine humours, reminded him of the things he had said, adding ferocious comments of her own. When they came to the nude statue she brandished her bosom and said, glaring at him:

'Well, here's your bit of homework! You were keen enough two hours ago. Haven't you anything more to say?'

Sorbier gazed at the figure with a look of melancholy in which she seemed to catch a hint of defiant regret. Snatching the stick from him she ran its ferrule over the stone curves, acidly remarking upon them as she did so.

'Talk about skin and bone! The poor creature looks half-starved – as flat in front as she is behind. You'd be black and blue if you went to bed with her.'

Sorbier was staring abstractedly in front of him, seeming lost in his dream of melancholy. Mathilde frowned, laid the stick down on the pedestal, folded her arms and said harshly:

'Well?'

He gazed at her like a hunted animal. For a moment he hesitated, then a cowardly giggle rose in his throat and he murmured:

'You're quite right. She's too young – boyish, in fact . . . A

real woman needs to be more – filled-out, as you might say.'

The flattery thus extorted brought a flush of triumph to Mathilde's cheeks. She slipped her arm through that of her husband with a slow purposeful movement, as though it were a final act of possession, and directed the family footsteps homewards. Victor and Félicien picked up the walking-stick from the pedestal and went running ahead with it, each holding one end. Their father watched them with relief, thankful to be rid of a burden which now seemed to him intolerable; but Mme Sorbier, having some inkling of this, called after them:

'Give the stick back to your father at once. It's not a toy for children.' And to her husband she said: 'Now that you've got it out of the wardrobe, darling, you must carry it every Sunday.'

Couldn't-Care-Less

ON an afternoon in July, the day after I came out of prison, I went along to the *Bar de la Boussole*, a sleazy little joint on the south side of the Boulevard Rochechouart. I went there to see a man called Médéric, known as Médé Clin d'Oeil, having been sent along to him by one of his friends whom I'd got to know during my last months inside. At first when I went in it looked as though the place was empty, but then the *patron*, who was leaning over his bar, moved aside a little and I saw that he was talking to three men sitting at a table in a dark corner. One of these, a big man with white hair and a little rat's eye, was Médéric. I use the singular because one eye was all he had, and it was what got him the name of 'Clin d'Oeil', the Winker. Although the man at the bar seemed to be addressing his remarks to him, he stayed quiet and left it to the other two to answer. They didn't amount to much. The one who was doing most of the talking was a little man with big shoulders and a fleshy, hard-guy face, wearing a bottle-green hat tilted well on one side. The other was pasty-faced and dressed in black; he looked like a lawyer's clerk with ulcers.

'Yes, but listen, Médéric,' the *patron* was saying. 'I'm going to tell you something. Before the war I never let a week go by without going to one cabaret or another, "L'Européen" or "Bobino" or whichever it might be. When it comes to singers I

reckon I'm as good a judge as I am of the things I serve at this bar. And as for André Claveaux, well he's got a nice, easy style I'll grant you, but when it comes to voice-production – '

'Now wait a minute,' said the hard guy. 'Excuse me interrupting, but I just want to say this – you're missing the point.'

'Missing the point, am I?' said the *patron*, grinning. 'Born yesterday, that's me. Hayseed from Hickville, that's my name.'

'Now listen, Gaston – '

'So that's what they call me? Well, fancy!'

This was the style of conversation that was going on as I went up to the counter. Médéric was smiling benevolently. I was seeing him for the first time and I wanted to hear him say something before I introduced myself, but the talk went on for a long time before he opened his mouth. I ordered a fruit juice and the *patron* served me without looking at me, too much interested in the argument. A thin dark-haired girl came in wearing a bright red dress, with dark brown eyes with coppery tints in them and a black lock of hair plastered on her forehead. She was a nice-looking piece, twenty or thereabouts, and she walked swaying her hips with her bottom wagging like the pendulum of a clock. She came up to the counter, and before ordering anything she looked questioningly at the *patron* with an anxious expression. He shook his head impatiently, as though he'd heard the question before and it annoyed him to have her go on asking when the answer was obvious. They said a few words too low for me to hear. The moll kept glancing in a furtive way in Médéric's direction, and I thought she was looking a bit angry too.

'Me,' said the hard guy, 'what I say is this, when the boss of a theatre or night club or anything else pays a person ten thousand a night for singing, he being a guy that knows his job, then

it proves that the singer's got something. That's the way I look at it.'

'All right,' said the *patron*, 'but there's just one little thing I'd like to mention. I'm talking about the quality of the voice and the feeling and the inspiration, and all you're talking about is money. I say that's no basis for serious criticism.'

'Well, of course, if you're going to say I've got no basis for serious criticism . . .'

The talk went on and on, and still Médéric didn't say anything. Now and then I saw his little rat's eye looking me over. It couldn't have been more than vague curiosity or just the habit of sizing people up. The girl in red was now drinking fruit juice a yard or two away from me. She had quietened down, but it looked as though she was still simmering and might blow her top at any moment. At last Médéric said something.

'Quite right,' he said amiably. 'You're both right.'

This put an end to the discussion but it didn't tell me much about Médé Clin d'Oeil. It seemed that his silences meant more than his words. A reserved type. I left the counter and went over to the trio.

'Monsieur Médéric?' I said. 'I have a message for you.'

I said it in a confidential tone of voice and then stepped back a pace to show that the message was confidential. The hard guy glared suspiciously at me with his hat pushed back on his head, and the one in black pretended not to notice me. Médé stood up good-humouredly and led the way to the door. As he passed her the moll tried to hold him up and said something in his ear. He shook her off, smiling affably, and said over his shoulder:

'I don't know anything about anything and anyway I've never met him.'

She looked as though she didn't believe this and stood glaring after him. Médéric went to the table nearest the door and

after pointing to a chair sat down on the one opposite it, with his back to the window.

'I talked about having a message,' I said, 'but that wasn't quite right. I've come from Christophe-le-Belge.'

Médéric nodded to show that he knew Christophe and then sat waiting. His hard, intelligent little eye watched me from under its lowered lid, never looking away for a second. I knew he had put me on that chair so as to have me in a good light. When I told him how and where I'd got to know the Belgian he said he wasn't in business any more and the only way he could help me was with good advice.

'It's the war that has changed me,' he said. 'In the old days I used to play it a bit rough, I admit, but what with the defeat and the Occupation I've come to have different ideas. I was unhappy for my country. "Médé," I said to myself, "you've been behaving like every other Frenchman, all out for a good time and thinking of no one but number one, and the result is that your country's in a bad way." Naturally being over fifty I wasn't going to volunteer to work in a labour camp or anything like that, so I decided to retire and live quietly. These last two years I haven't done any business at all. I've been living on my savings, which don't amount to much, but I can just get by if I'm careful.'

It sounded like a tale in a children's picture-book. I could see the twinkle of malice in Médé's one little eye while he talked this hooey. He went on:

'And my reward comes when Marshal Pétain talks to us on the radio. "Médé," I can say with a clear conscience, "you have the right to listen like every other honest man." '

'Well, I'm glad I came to see you,' I said. 'If you should hear of a job going – a churchwarden or anything like that – I hope you'll bear me in mind.'

This made him smile a little.

'Joking apart, my boy, there's a satisfaction in honest toil, the kind that leaves you too tired to get ideas in your head.'

'And then again, we can't do too much for the working man.'

I started to get up, but he put a hand on my shoulder and made me sit down again.

'A bright boy, aren't you? Sharp. Well, I like that. As I said, I don't count for anything any more, but I've still got friends, men I respect even if I don't approve of the things they do. I give them a bit of a lecture now and then, about their duty as citizens and the national honour and so forth, and they all agree, they'd like to do better if they could. The trouble is, they've all got responsibilities; it may be their old mother or children to educate or just that they've fallen for some dame that isn't happy without a mink coat. By the way, what did you go inside for?'

'Just small stuff – a cash-register. I got off with eight months.'

'And before you cleaned out this cash-register what was your line?'

I wasn't so keen on answering that one and I daresay I showed it. Médé waited a moment and then said gently:

'Is your father still in stir?'

Although he may have expected it to, the question didn't surprise me. Before he was arrested for a big black-market deal my old man ran a restaurant on the Rue Saint-Georges, and the bar, down in the basement, was pretty full from six o'clock on. I didn't remember seeing Médé there, but except in one or two cases I hadn't paid much attention to the customers.

'He's got another two years to do,' I said.

'You aren't going to tell me that he left you flat?'

'Everything was seized. The bank-account was blocked and

Tall Betty had all the currency. All I was left with was the petty cash.'

'I daresay, but you had friends. You could have made out somehow.'

'I could have.'

I answered tersely, a bit more so than I really meant. Médé grew serious. I must have had that cold, tightened-up look on my face that has done me about as much harm as it has good. He looked me over for quite a time, but in a new way – there wasn't any more of the sarcastic twinkle in his little eye.

'Tall Betty – couldn't you have a word with her?'

'Not one.'

'Your father must have left a big packet with her, not counting the furs and jewellery.'

Médé went on about this, trying to laugh me out of what he called my scruples. I said I hadn't got any more scruples than I had regrets, but I had a hard job getting him to understand that I did things because of the way I felt more than for reasons, and never for any kind of principle. This seemed to shock him and he said quite angrily:

'That's what the young are like these days. A bitch that does you out of your rightful inheritance and you're too high-hat to lay a finger on her, but on the other hand you go cleaning out the till in some little backstreet shop. All right. So what do you want to do now?'

I found it harder still to explain to him that I hadn't got any exact plans. What I wanted was anything that would save me from getting bored – a kind of not caring about myself or anyone else which, as I know quite well, means that at heart I'm nothing but a waster. If I'm not to give way to the tendency I have to keep myself in a state of permanent tension and I don't know of any kind of regular job that will do that for you. When I was flat, before I took to breaking tills, I thought of joining

one of the Resistance terrorist groups, but the idea of country – 'my country' – doesn't mean any more to me than the idea of social justice. In any gang of fanatics, no matter what kind, I'd be nothing but odd man out. I wouldn't really care about what they were doing, and they'd feel it like an insult and they'd hate and mistrust me. I'd seen it happen often enough with my own family, because I never had any kind of feeling for the clan. I can't feel love or hate. I can't make life add up to anything at all. So there's no place for me, and either I'm on the outside with the riff-raff, watching and not caring, or else I have to keep myself feeling alive by being in the thick of something or other, anything with a kick to it. I tried to explain this to Médé, and in the end, although I didn't spend many words on it or much care whether he understood or not, he seemed to understand pretty well.

'I see. You're a boy that likes to play it hard. I don't mind telling you that's not my line and I don't mix with those sort of people. All the same, go and see Gustav. I don't know him personally, but I've heard of him. They say he does quite a lot of business.'

He described this Gustav and said I would probably find him round about eight at a certain café on the Boulevard de la Chapelle. After which he gave me a nod and without saying anything else went back to the other end of the bar. I went to the counter to pay for my fruit juice. The girl had just paid for hers and went out ahead of me. She was waiting outside and she came up and asked me, in a Marseilles accent, if I'd known Médé long and if I was doing business with him.

'You want to watch him,' she said. 'He's shopped a good few in his time.'

We talked a bit and then we went to a cinema where they were giving an old musical with a lot of nudes. I started patting her knee by way of politeness, but she said to forget it, and with

the actors on the screen bellowing and the people round telling her to shut up, she told me a long muddled story in which Médé's part sounded a bit vague. It seems a boy friend of hers had mysteriously disappeared a few days after quarrelling with Médé, and she reckoned Médé had fixed him. She was just starting it all over again when an usherette came and told her to be quiet. When we left the cinema she dated me for the same evening but didn't turn up. I never saw her again.

I went along to the café on the Boulevard de la Chapelle at eight to see Gustav. He was easy to recognise from Médé's description. He looked like a small-time office clerk, surly and threadbare.

'I've come from Médé,' I said.

'I don't know Médé,' he said slowly, stressing every word as though to rub it well in.

'Anything you say.'

'It isn't a question of what I say. It's a plain fact. I don't know any Médé. Well, skip it. Are you ready to leave tomorrow on a trip lasting eight or ten days?'

'Yes,' I said.

For a few moments neither of us said anything. Then Gustav asked: 'No questions?'

'No.'

'O.K. Nine o'clock tomorrow morning at the Gare de l'Est outside the booking-office for Troyes. Bring as little baggage as possible.'

The conversation hadn't lasted five minutes. I got up and left without drinking anything.

Later that evening, while I was waiting in a café on the Place Pigalle for the piece who didn't turn up, I saw an old school-fellow coming towards me, a boy I'd been with at the Lycée. He and his father had been to the theatre together. He seemed pleased to see me. They both came and sat at my table, and he

told me all about what he was doing and poured out news about other people we'd been at school with. The father sat there crooning with rapture over these reminiscences of our youth. I got no pleasure out of it, but I wasn't too bored either, and I did my best to look interested. I didn't always succeed and when there was a lull in the conversation I told them I'd just done eight months in prison for theft. I didn't say it as though I was proud of it and I wasn't particularly trying to shock them. Just the casual way I said it seemed to horrify them more than the thing itself. The old man snuffled and moaned and the son said, 'We'd better go, Father,' and led him away after leaving two hundred francs on the table which I left lying there.

The trip, with Gustav and two other young men of my age, lasted a little more than a week, as he had said. It wasn't as dangerous as you might have thought from the big talk that went on after we got back. We looted a number of isolated farms in the Othe country, after shooting up the occupants. It was easy enough. Generally speaking, the farmers aren't armed, and you nearly always have the advantage of surprise. Gustav, very sensibly, always attacked in the early hours of the morning, at the time when the people are least likely to be woken up by their dogs. Besides which the early light makes it easy to watch all the exits, because the great thing is not to let anyone get away. Gustav ran the show very efficiently. He was the sort that likes things to be properly done, and he checked all the details like a factory foreman lining up a job. He did his killing carefully, without either excitement or cruelty, not like the other two, Fred and Pierrot, who got a kick out of it and enjoyed hurting people unnecessarily. I did my part quite calmly, although I had to overcome the revulsion I feel at the sight of blood and death agonies and faces convulsed with terror, which is something that I don't think I shall ever lose. But on the

other hand I haven't any feeling for humanity to be troubled by the thought of taking life.

You need to have been down and out round about the age of twenty, the way I was, and to have sat on public benches with your hunger and your absolute boredom, watching the people hurry past all busy with their own affairs, and feeling as though you were invisible in the midst of your fellow-creatures, to know what a sham it really is, all the talk about human solidarity. But so far as that goes, ever since I was a child I have had that sensation of there being no real tie between human beings, nothing but a superficial exchange, mostly amiable but sometimes not. And finally the idea of death as such, my own or another person's, doesn't inspire me with any religious awe.

The recollection of my crimes is disagreeable to me because it entails recalling details that I dislike thinking about, but it doesn't seriously trouble me any more than the thought of the crimes committed by people I've worked with. Gustav was very soon impressed by my coolness and general attitude to the business, perhaps especially by my polite indifference to both people and events, which, as he said himself, helped to create an atmosphere of well-mannered discipline in the gang. It seems also, according to Gustav, that the quiet, unshowy way in which I did my killing was something to please the experts. Before long he began to show his trust in me by listening to my suggestions and leaving me to carry out one or two rather tricky jobs by myself. But he never told me the name of the boss we were working for. Our excursions were always very profitable, and we were never in any serious danger. On the third day of our first trip Gustav passed the word to the local police about some young people, Gaullists or Communists I don't know which, who were hiding in the woods and looked as though they might hamper our movements.

I got back to Paris with twenty thousand francs in my

pocket, and I didn't see Gustav until we went out on our second trip a week later. In the meantime I went to see my father's mistress, known to her friends as Tall Betty. During the seven or eight years she'd been with father she had always tried to behave like a mother to me, which left me cold although it didn't actually annoy me. In fact we were on quite good terms and we had even slept together a few times when it happened to work out that way. Betty asked amiably if I'd had any news of father. I said I hadn't but I supposed he was still in prison.

'Talking of which,' she said, 'I hear you've been in trouble too.'

'Where did you hear that?'

'From Médé. You know him, don't you? He came and had a drink with me last Saturday. He's nice, Médé. He's got nice manners and plenty of sense.'

'What did he tell you?'

'We were only chatting. He said you'd just come out of prison. He's coming to see me again.'

I didn't believe Médé's visit was as disinterested as all that and I wanted Betty to be on her guard. She went on to talk about how she'd fallen deeply in love with a young man of very good family who'd been caught in Algeria by the Anglo-American landing and couldn't get back. Before I left I warned her again against Médé. I didn't care who she fell for, but I was amazed at the way Médé had used my name to get to know her, in spite of my having made it perfectly clear that I wanted her to be left undisturbed in possession of what he called my 'paternal inheritance'. But then I forgot all about it.

For more than a month I went round farms in the Île-de-France, in company with Gustav and two or three other killers, not always the same ones. On our last outing the farmers shot one of our party and I got a bullet in the thigh. Gustav managed to get me back to Paris and into a nursing-home. They

thought I was a patriot wounded in the Resistance, and so I got top priority treatment and very quickly recovered. While I was convalescing Gustav came to see me.

'The boss has been talking to me about you. He thinks a lot of you, you know.'

'I didn't know.'

'Maybe not, but he keeps an eye on everything and he knows about your work. Just to show his appreciation he's given me a present for you – the complete works of Victor Hugo bound in Russian leather.'

'That's very handsome.'

'Handsome! I should say it is,' said Gustav rather glumly. 'He's never given me a present like that. Well of course I haven't got your education. There's no getting away from it, anyone who's had proper schooling has a big advantage. Still, I'm delighted for your sake. The boss says that when you're better he doesn't want you to go on with this farm job. He's got something more interesting for you.'

When I left the nursing-home Gustav told me what this new job was. The boss was arranging air passages for people wanting to escape to England, at a stiff price. My job was to escort the customer from Paris and when I'd got him to a lonely spot, where the plane was supposed to land, I was to put a bullet in his head. The money and jewels he might have on him, and they never left without carrying all they could, was the most important part of my pay.

I didn't like the job. I hadn't any more scruples about killing, but I don't like cheating anyone who trusts me. It's nothing to do with conscience. It's just a feeling that I have, but it works much more strongly than any careful weighing of right and wrong in the mind of an honest man. My first customer was a man of about forty who treated me from the start as a friend. After spending an hour with him on the train which should

have been taking him to his death I realised that I'd never be able to kill him. So I told him the truth and managed quite cleverly to persuade him to keep the secret. If he was questioned by any other member of the gang he was to say that something had cropped up unexpectedly at the last minute which had forced him to change his plans. It cost him a few thousand francs, but he was too happy at saving his skin to worry about anything else, and he showered me with gratitude in spite of the fact that I was a professional killer.

So we turned round and got back to Paris at about eight, and the same evening I ran into Tall Betty in the Métro.

'I'm glad to see you,' she said. 'I'm leaving tomorrow.'

People were passing. She pushed me against the wall and said in a low voice:

'I'm leaving for England tomorrow evening. Médé has fixed it.'

'By plane?'

'Yes.'

I wished her bon voyage and she gave me messages for my father. It didn't surprise me to learn that my boss was Médé. The trouble Gustav had taken not to give anything away had made me suspect it long ago. Nor did I much care what happened to Betty. But what annoyed me was that he should have got to her through me, which amounted to a betrayal of trust.

The next day I set out on the same journey alone, arriving at about six at the place where the plane was supposed to land. Gustav had told me in the morning that the boss was personally handling the job that evening. The so-called landing-ground was a big field near a wood, separated from it by a strip of waste land where there were the remains of a burnt-out farmhouse. The farmhouse cellar was the place where the victims were supposed to be disposed of. I had made a preliminary trip to the place with Gustav, who had shown me the whole set-up.

I waited hidden behind some shrubs amid the ruined walls, and when I saw the two of them coming across the field I hopped down into the cellar to wait for them. Médé was politely carrying Betty's travelling case. I hid on what would be his blind side, so he didn't see me when he came down the steps into the cellar and I had no trouble in disarming him. He took it quite well and sat down on a trestle when I told him to. The sight of me in that dismal place alarmed Betty, who started to whimper and said that something was being hidden from her. Médé told her to shut up and waited to hear what I had to say.

'I take it,' I said, 'that what you're thinking of is my paternal inheritance.'

'I wanted to give you a nice surprise by restoring what rightfully belongs to you,' said Médé, 'but it seems that you knew what I was planning. No doubt Madame, here, was guilty of an indiscretion.'

'I don't think I should have seen much of the money. In any case, it was no business of yours. I thought I made that clear when we talked about it.'

Médé nodded towards Tall Betty, who was trying to slip out through the doorway. I pushed her back to the far end of the cellar in spite of her protests. Médé thought for a moment, and I could see his little rat's eye gleaming in the half-darkness.

'All the same,' he said, 'fair's fair. I consider that when a father is in trouble his rights should be protected, even if his son is too young to know what is due to him. A father's work should first of all be for the benefit of his children. In these days nobody respects principles any more. The result is that right-minded people get angry, and no wonder. When your father went to prison Madame should have handed the money over to you and gone to work while she waited for him to come out.'

Betty protested that my father hadn't left her anything.

Médé had no difficulty in getting her to contradict herself, and he accused her of having had lovers. They both got heated and I began to be bored. Betty had the bad taste to remind me that she had given herself to me, and then they both brought up the uncomplimentary things the other had said about me. At last I tossed Médé's gun into the middle of the cellar and went out, shutting the door behind me. I heard the sound of voices and movement and scuffling feet. I sat down to wait in the bushes, and a minute later there was the sound of a shot. Betty, looking dishevelled, appeared at the top of the stairs and I was almost disappointed. But I think I should have been just as disappointed whichever way it had gone.

The Wine of Paris

In a village in the Arbois country there lived a wine-grower named Félicien Guérillot who did not like wine. Yet he came of sound stock. His father and his grandfather, also wine-growers, had both been carried off by cirrhosis of the liver at the age of fifty or thereabouts, and none of his forebears on his mother's side had ever done injustice to a bottle. This strange and shameful weakness weighed heavily upon Félicien. He grew the best wines in the district, besides possessing the best cellar. Léontine Guérillot, his wife, was a woman of a gentle and submissive nature, neither prettier nor better shaped than is desirable for the peace of mind of an honest man. Félicien would have been the happiest of wine-growers had he not had an aversion for wine that appeared to be insurmountable. Vainly had he striven with the utmost zeal and resolution to overcome the failing. Vainly had he tested all vintages in the hope of finding one that would yield him the key to the unknown paradise. Besides sampling all the wines of Burgundy and Bordeaux, those of the Loire and the Rhône, and the champagnes and the wines of Alsace, and the straw-coloured wines, and red, white and *rosé*, and Algerian wines and the roughest and thinnest of table-wines, he had not neglected the Rhine wines, or the Tokays, or the wines of Spain and Italy, Cyprus and Portugal. But each of his experiments had ended in disillusion. With

every wine it was the same as with that of his own country. Even in the driest, thirstiest season of the year he could not swallow a mouthful without having the sensation, horrible to relate, of gulping down cod-liver oil.

Léontine alone knew her husband's dreadful secret and helped him to conceal it. Félicien could never have brought himself to admit in public that he did not like wine. It would have been as bad as to say that he did not like his own children, even worse, for it may happen anywhere that a father comes to detest his son, but there has never been anyone in the Arbois country who did not like wine. Such a thing is Heaven's retribution for who shall say what sin, an aberration on the part of Nature, a monstrous deformity that any right-thinking and well-drinking man will refuse to contemplate. One may dislike carrots, spinach, beetroot or the skin on hot milk. But not wine. It is like hating the air one breathes, since each is equally indispensable. So it was not from any foolish sense of pride, but out of respect for human dignity, that Félicien Guérillot . . .

Well, now, there is a story about wine that seemed to be starting quite nicely. But it has suddenly begun to weary me. It does not belong to the age we live in, and I feel uncomfortable with it. Besides which, I am too old for cod-liver oil. So I shall drop that story, although all kinds of things might have happened to Félicien, amusing, cruel, stirring and pathetic. I can see him, for example, simulating a slight alcoholic tremor in order to mislead his neighbours, all of whom, deceived and at the same time amazed, would be filled with esteem for him, and one would say to the others, speaking for all:

'Do you see that? Here's Félicien getting the shakes already, and not yet thirty, taking after his father, Achille Guérillot, now there was a drinker for you! You remember him, eh, Achille Guérillot? He wasn't a one to suck acid-drops as plenty of us know, but never drunk, mind, always under control – a real

wine-grower, in fact, a real drinker, a real man. Yes, that was his father, Achille Guérillot, a proper drinker, no denying it, what I call a real drinker, or a real man if you'd rather put it that way. And do you remember how father Guérillot – Achille, I mean, I'm not going back to the old man, Guérillot Auguste, although mark you he was a good drinker too, but it's Achille I'm talking about, Guérillot Achille, who's been dead these fifteen years, come to think of it, that very hot year, the year the fleas were hopping about on people the way they do on cattle – but it was, I tell you, it was the year the girl Claudette got the gendarmes drunk the time they came here about the business of Panouillot's mare. And talking of Jules Panouillot, there was another drinker who could have shown them a thing or two if he was alive today. Why, him and Achille, they were like brothers, and they got up to some capers together, I can tell you. There was the time they dressed up as devils to scare the curé's maid-servant. But if I was to start on that story now I'd have you laughing till you choked and it'd cost you a bottle apiece. To come back to father Guérillot (Achille), it's not hard to reckon how old he was when he started getting the shakes because he was born two days after my own father, and I know that be-cause they were conscripted together, I remember my father telling us one day when we were chatting about one thing and another the way we are today, but mark you that was ten years ago. Yes, it must be at least ten years because my great-uncle, Glod'Pierre, was still alive, he'd come from Aiglepierre to visit us in Tantiet-le-jambe's pony-trap (there was another solid drinker for you and after the skirts in a flash); well, it was all of ten years ago and maybe eleven, ten or eleven it doesn't matter which, it's only the facts that matter. So there were the three of us you see, me and my father and my great-uncle and a bottle on the table – oh, nothing special in the way of a bottle, just a little wine that I remember my old man used to make out of a

corner of the vineyard that sometimes yielded and sometimes didn't, but a nice little wine all the same, fresh and round, with a taste of the pebbles on the Labbé slope. Well, there we were, chatting about this and that, anything that came into our heads, and all of a sudden my Uncle Glod'Pierre – I call him my uncle, but he was my great-uncle really – my Uncle Glod'Pierre, he said, "And what's become of that fellow you did your service with, what was his name?" (My uncle didn't come from round here, you must remember. I keep on calling him my uncle . . .) "What was the fellow called?" says my uncle . . . "Do you mean, Antoine Bougalet?" says my father . . . "No, that's not it. He was called – " "Clovis Rouillot?" "No, no, the name was – " "Adrien Bouchat?" . . . "No, no, no, no. His name was – now I've got it – Achille! Achille – that was his name!" . . . "Ah, you mean Achille Guérillot," my father said. "Well, so far as I know he isn't doing so badly and anyway he isn't complaining. He's lying quiet as quiet alongside his parents in the cemetery. Poor Achille," my father said, "he had a bad time dying. He died the day before his fifty-second birthday, and that I know for certain because it was the day after my own fifty-second birthday and I came into the world two days before him. The poor old fellow, he started to get the shakes, I remember, two years before he died." . . . That's what my father said. Two years, he said. And two from fifty-two leaves fifty. So you see Achille was fifty when he started to get the shakes and here's this son of his starting when he's barely thirty. And let me tell you something. Félicien's a man who knows how to drink. . . .'

Secure in his reputation as a drinker, Félicien might develop political ambitions and find himself compelled by the necessities of his electoral campaign to drink in public. I can see a fine theme here for a good, boozy novel, bursting with fearless realism and devilish profound psychology, but the very thought

of it makes me tired. I am too immersed in the present. There are certain lateral trends which have started all kinds of contemporary gimmicks fizzing at the back of my head. I simply haven't the heart to write about sun-bathed terraces and merry little wines. In consequence of which, I will now tell a sad story about wine. It happens in Paris, and the name of the hero is Duvilé.

There lived in Paris, in January in the year 1945, a certain Étienne Duvilé, aged thirty-seven or eight, who adored wine. Alas, he had none. Wine cost 200 francs a bottle, and Duvilé was not rich. A clerk in the Government service, he asked nothing better than to be bribed, but his was an unrewarding post where there was nothing to sell. On the other hand he had a wife, two children and a father-in-law aged seventy-two, a bad-tempered, self-indulgent old party who made a favour of the 1500 francs monthly pension which he contributed to the household budget, and would have eaten enough for half a dozen fathers-in-law if he hadn't been rationed. And pork cost 300 francs a kilo, eggs 21 francs apiece and wine, I repeat, 200 francs a bottle. On top of which the weather was bitterly cold, four degrees below freezing in the apartment, and not a stick of wood or a lump of coal. The family's only resource was to plug in the electric iron, which was passed from hand to hand at mealtimes and during their hours of leisure. When the father-in-law got hold of it he would never let go until it was taken from him by force, and the same thing happened with bread, potatoes, greens and meat, when there was any. Bitter disputes, violent and often sordid, arose between him and Duvilé. The old man would complain that he did not get the comforts to which his 1500 francs entitled him, whereupon Duvilé would invite him to go and live elsewhere and his wife would come to her father's support, calling her husband unkind names. The two men had had difficulty enough in putting up with one

another even in easier times, before the war, but in those days their mutual antipathy had found a noble and abundant outlet in politics. One was a republican-socialist and the other a socialist-republican, and the gulf represented by this clash in their political views had been large enough to swallow up all other quarrels. But now that wine had failed them, disputation in this field had ceased to be possible. The fact is that before the war wine and politics went together, each waxing and thriving upon the other. Wine drove men to politics and politics drove them to wine, generously, symbiotically, and thunderously. But in the year 1945, lacking the sustenance of wine, politics stayed buried in the newspaper. Grievances, challenges, war-cries and anathemas were squalidly concerned with matters of food and fuel. Like so many others, the Duvilé household lived in a state of constant hankering after things to eat and drink. The children's daydreams, and those of their mother and grandfather, were stuffed with sausage and pâté, poultry, chocolate and pastries. And Duvilé thought about wine. He thought of it with a sensual fervour that was sometimes acute, and at such moments felt his very soul rise strangled to his parched throat. Being by nature reserved, he said nothing to anyone of this yearning for wine that so tormented him, but in moments of solitude he lost himself in visions of bottles, casks, litres of red wine, and without emerging from his dream, taking a step backward, as it were, and contemplating this red abundance, he felt rising to his lips the despairing cry of the dying man who yet clutches at life.

On a Saturday night, with the need for wine burning within him, he got into bed beside his wife, slept badly and dreamed the following dream: Towards nine o'clock in the morning, in a dim half-light, he left his house to catch the métro. The entrance to the station was deserted. The ticket-collector at the barrier was a woman who turned out to be his wife. After punch-

ing his ticket she said to him casually, 'Our children are dead.' So intense was his grief that he nearly cried aloud, but he controlled himself and reflected, 'After all, I might not have known of it until later. I shall go to the party just the same.' He went down the stone circular staircase leading to the bowels of the métro and forgot his children. As he reached the third landing a patch of darkness formed in front of him, causing him to stray into a sort of tunnel with walls made jagged with artificial rocks. A café waiter whom he knew by sight was standing by a narrow door which he opened for him. Duvilé passed through and found himself in a large, unevenly lighted room. Drifts of shadow partly obscured the walls, one of which, in process of demolition, allowed the passage of a stream of dubious daylight which caused him a sense of acute anguish. In the middle of the room stood a table loaded with cakes and sandwiches. Two fountains of wine, white and red, played into successive basins, one below the other. Duvilé's astonishment did not cause him to lose his head. He calmly drank as an apéritif a glass of white wine that had no taste, and then ate several sandwiches, including one of cheese, in the hope that they would bring out the flavour of the red wine. Neither the consistency nor the taste of the sandwiches matched their appearance, and in his disappointment he began to suspect that he was the victim of a dream. To prevent himself waking up he ran to the red-wine fountain and, bending over the basin, drank like an animal. But despite his efforts and the long gulps he took he absorbed very little liquid, so little indeed that its taste still remained uncertain. In his distress he straightened himself and glanced behind him. On the other side of the table, seated in enormous armchairs, three plump, full-bellied men with large, presidential faces were watching him with malicious smiles. Duvilé wanted to run away, but he found that he was wearing no shoes. He smiled obsequiously back at them and felt no shame in doing

so. One of the three men arose and addressed him without opening his mouth, his thoughts imprinting themselves upon Duvilé's mind without the trickery of words. 'We are rich and happy,' he said silently. 'We live in the depths, far below the world that suffers and runs risks. We constantly increase our happiness by thinking of the sufferings of others. We play at being poor, at being hungry and cold and frightened, and we find the game delightful. But nothing is as good as reality. That is why I have brought you here, so that . . .' At this point the words, or rather the thoughts, of the happy man became confused and ceased to be comprehensible. Then he resumed in a huge and crushing voice that was still silent: 'Impostor! You are wearing a gold wedding-ring and a gold watch which you received on the occasion of your first communion. Give them to me!' The three happy men, each having donned an officer's cap, abruptly left their places, and Duvilé, who now had shoes on his feet, ran to the far end of the room. When it seemed that he was certain to be caught he thrust his hand into the pocket of his overcoat and fished out his wife, behind whom he sought to hide. But he was already cut off by his pursuers by a mist marked with squares along which he hurried until this criss-cross took the form of a barred pigeon-hole, behind which he found his wife selling métro tickets, bread-coupons and cleaning-pads of wire gauze. Without stopping at the pigeon-hole he ran down a sloping corridor, reflecting with extreme anxiety that his wife would be waiting for him on the platform. The corridor was several miles long, but he reached the end without having to run along it, simply by arranging figures in his head. On the platform he again suspected that he was dreaming, because beneath the vaulted roof there were several zones of light of differing degrees of intensity and having no connection between them. It was in one of these breaks in continuity that he discovered his wife. Colourless and hard to see, she was wear-

ing an extravagant feathered hat which caused him great concern. He looked about him a number of times, fearing to find his departmental chief among the passengers. 'You must look after father,' she said to him. 'He's in his basket.' Duvilé saw his father-in-law, a few paces behind his wife, standing with both legs in one of the four compartments of a wicker bottle-carrier. Standing very erect, his arms tight at his sides, the old man was wearing the red cap of the *Chasseurs d'Afrique*. Followed by his wife, Duvilé picked up the basket without any conscious effort and carried it to the edge of the platform, where he set it down. The string of métro coaches which the three of them thus stood awaiting had become for him an immense hope filling him with anxious joy. At length he heard the subterranean rumbling which heralded their approach, but what emerged from the tunnel was only a miniature train, a child's toy such as may be bought in a cardboard box. A feeling of violent disappointment, commensurate with his hope, rent his heart. So extreme was his anguish that he thought himself dying and awoke with groans.

Duvilé did not get to sleep again, but lay until daybreak pondering over his dream. As his thoughts dwelt upon it, details re-emerged from the depths of his consciousness and were brought into sharp relief. For him the culminating episode was his entry into that cellar of the happy life. The thought of it obsessed him throughout the Sunday morning. He replied absently to his wife and children, sought to be alone, and often paused and stayed motionless, in the midst of some activity, while he listened to the sound of a fountain, the splash of wine from a basin to the one below. As happened every Sunday morning, at about eleven he went out by himself to do the household shopping. Three days previously it had been announced that a new issue of wine was shortly to take place, and their provision merchant believed that it would be coming very

soon. Duvilé had a strong feeling that it would come today. But contrary to his expectation it had not arrived, and he was as deeply disappointed as he had been when the child's train pulled into the métro station. His wife, when he returned home, asked him if he did not think he had caught flu, so haggard was his appearance. He was irritable and taciturn during the meal. The fountains of wine sang a sad and piercing song in his head. He ate without appetite and drank nothing at all. There was nothing on the table but a jug of water, revolting in its limpidity.

They were half-way through their meal, and Duvilé was still brooding over his dream, when suddenly the recollection of the straw bottle-carrier caused him to raise his eyes to glance at his father-in-law. A light of curiosity, of sudden astonishment, illuminated his apathetic gaze. It occurred to him abruptly that the old man had an interesting shape. His slender torso, his narrow, sloping shoulders and thin neck surmounted by a small head with a rubicund, bald crown, all this gave food for thought. 'I'm not dreaming now,' said Duvilé to himself. 'He really does look like a bottle of claret.' The notion seemed to him preposterous and he tried to turn his thoughts elsewhere, but despite himself he found his eyes constantly returning to glance furtively at his father-in-law. The resemblance became more and more striking. With his rosy cranium one could have sworn that he was a capped wine bottle.

In order to escape his obsession Duvilé went out for the afternoon, but when he again saw his father-in-law, at supper that evening, the likeness leapt to his eyes with a vividness that caused his heart to thump. The fixity of his gaze finally struck the old man, who was annoyed by it.

'There must be something very queer about me if you can't take your eyes off me. But I suppose it's because you think I'm eating too much. You think fifteen-hundred a month isn't

enough to pay for a mess of cabbage-stalks, old potatoes and frozen carrots – ha!'

Duvilé blushed deeply and stammered humble apologies. He was accustomed to retort savagely to utterances of this kind, and his change of tone surprised everyone. When the meal was over and the children, playing near their grandfather, occasionally bumped against him, he intervened with a solicitude which was no less unusual.

'Be careful what you're doing,' he said sharply. 'You mustn't shake him like that. He must be kept quite still.'

He passed a bad night, his slumber oppressed by nightmares, in which, however, no wine figured and no father-in-law. Next morning, for the first time in his life, he felt bored and irritated at the thought of having to go to the office. As a rule he went readily enough: indeed, like many other men who would blush to admit it, he preferred the atmosphere of his place of work to that of the domestic hearth. But that morning he would have liked to stay at home. Family life had suddenly acquired for him an inexplicable charm. As he stood in the lobby, about to leave, he heard a thud followed by a groan. Without even troubling to ask where the sound came from he rushed into his father-in-law's room and found him lying face down on the floor. The old man had stumbled and in falling had struck his head against the edge of the chest of drawers. Trembling with anxiety, Duvilé picked him up and helped him into the bathroom. Blood was trickling from a small cut over one eyebrow. For some moments Duvilé stood motionless, staring wide-eyed at the precious red liquid flowing as though from a fountain. It took the arrival of his wife to arouse him from his state of rapt contemplation, and while she was busying herself with the wound he murmured:

'Fortunately it's near the cork. That isn't so serious.'

From that day on Étienne Duvilé went to work only with

the utmost reluctance. The anxious hours he spent at the office seemed to drag interminably, for he was tormented by the fear lest in his absence his father-in-law should get broken. In the evening he would run for the métro and burst breathlessly into the apartment crying, 'Is Grandfather all right?'; and upon being assured that he was he would hasten to the old man's side and overwhelm him with tokens of solicitude, urging him to take a more comfortable armchair, fetching a cushion, watching over his movements, begging him to take care as he passed through a doorway – in short, sparing no pains to ensure him a shock-free and well-padded existence. Touched by the change in him, his father-in-law responded with amicable gestures of his own, so that an atmosphere of affectionate harmony now prevailed in the home. Nevertheless the old man had vague misgivings when he found his son-in-law hovering round him with a corkscrew.

'Étienne, what the devil are you doing with that thing?' he asked. 'You can't have any use for it.'

'True, true,' said Duvilé with a sigh. 'It's too small.'

With a sense of frustration he returned the corkscrew to the kitchen drawer.

One day when he was on his way home to lunch Duvilé ran into an old army comrade with whom he had gone through the retreat of 1940. There are memorable bottles in the lives of all old soldiers. In the course of their reminiscences his friend asked him if he remembered how they had sheltered for a time in an abandoned wine-cellar. 'Remember Sergeant Moreau opening the bottles? One whack with a poker and he took the neck off just level with the shoulders, neat as anything.' His head filled with these recollections, Duvilé went on home. A light of secret rejoicing irradiated his countenance and his eyes bulged slightly.

'Is Grandfather all right?'

'Peep-bo!' answered the old gentleman in person, putting his head round the door.

They both laughed heartily and went to the luncheon-table. When his father-in-law was seated Duvilé approached him with the poker in his hand.

'Don't move,' he said, putting a finger under his chin.

The old man chuckled amiably. Taking a pace backwards to allow himself freedom of movement, Duvilé caught him a hefty whack on the side of the neck. The shock was severe but not fatal. The victim uttered a yell. Mme Duvilé and the children sought to intervene with cries and supplications. But Duvilé was seeing red wine. Luckily a neighbour, alarmed by the commotion, burst into the room. Thinking that a bottle of burgundy had entered, Duvilé turned to concentrate upon him, for he was particularly fond of burgundy. But here he met with a vigorous resistance which soon caused him to give up the attempt. Escaping from the apartment he dashed downstairs, still grasping the poker. And in the street a wonderful sight met his eyes. Dozens and dozens of bottles of every conceivable vintage were parading up and down the pavement, some singly and others in groups and pairs. For a moment he stood gazing with affection at the charming spectacle of a vigorous, mature burgundy escorting a slender, long-necked bottle of Alsatian wine. Then he noticed a beggar whose dusty aspect appealed to him, and, rushing at him, he knocked him cold with a single blow of the poker. He was overpowered by two passing American soldiers and taken to the police station, where he showed a lively desire to drink the duty sergeant.

The latest news of Duvilé is that he is in a mental home, and since the doctors have put him on *eau de Vittel* it does not look to me as though he will be ready to come out very soon. Fortunately for him, I am on the friendliest terms with his wife and father-in-law, and I hope soon to persuade them to send him

into the Arbois country, to stay with a wine-grower named Félicien Guérillot, who, after numerous adventures that deserve to be recounted, has finally developed such a taste for wine that he has genuinely got the shakes.

Martin the Novelist

THERE was once upon a time a novelist named Martin, who could not restrain himself from killing off the leading characters in his novels, and also the minor characters. These unhappy people, overflowing with hope and vigour in Chapter One, were apt to die as though of an epidemic in the course of the last twenty or thirty pages, often in the prime of life. In the end these hecatombs proved harmful to the author's reputation. While extolling his genius, people said that so many premature deaths made even his finest works too depressing to read. So they read them less and less. And the critics, who had encouraged him at the beginning, began to grow weary of his sombre tendency, hinting that he had an 'artificial approach to life' and even saying so in print.

Yet Martin was the kindest of men. He was devoted to his characters and wanted nothing more than to see them live to a ripe old age, but the impulse was too strong for him. As he approached the final chapters, his heroes and heroines came apart in his hands. Despite his utmost precautions some fatality always snatched them from him. In one case he managed, by sacrificing all the other characters, to keep his heroine alive to the last page; but just as he was congratulating himself the poor girl died of a thrombosis, fifteen lines from the end. On another occasion he sought to overcome the difficulty by writing a novel

about a nursery school in which no character was more than five years old, considering, and rightly, that the innocence of their age, to say nothing of probability, would disarm implacable Destiny. But unfortunately the thing turned into a saga, and by the time it reached the fifteen-hundredth page all his infants had become octogenarians and nothing could prevent him from recording their last breath.

One morning Martin went to call on his publisher and, with a diffident smile, asked him for an advance. His publisher also smiled, but in no very encouraging manner, and asked, changing the subject:

'Have you started on the new book?'

'Oh, certainly,' said Martin. 'I've written more than a third.'

'Are you pleased with it?'

'Very,' said Martin with enthusiasm. 'Very pleased indeed. Without boasting I think I may say that I have never been happier in my choice of characters and situations. I'll tell you in two words what it's about.'

He went on to outline the plot. It was the story of a higher-grade civil servant named Alfred Soubiron, aged forty-five, with blue eyes and a small black moustache. This worthy man had lived in perfect contentment with his wife and young son until his mother-in-law, suddenly rejuvenated by plastic-surgery, inspired him with an incestuous passion which robbed him of all peace of mind.

'Splendid,' said the publisher. 'Excellent. But tell me – in spite of her appearance of youth and beauty, the mother-in-law must be getting on a bit?'

'Of course! cried Martin. 'Exactly. That is one of the most dramatic aspects of the situation. She's seventy-one.'

'Quite so. But at the age of seventy-one, unless Providence is exceptionally well-disposed, life tends to hang by a thread.'

'She's a woman of unusually robust constitution,' said Martin. 'Indeed, when I think of the courage with which she bore . . .' He broke off, remained pensive for a moment, and then said with a worried expression: 'But it's true, of course, that a person that age is always at the mercy of an accident. And then again, the fierce blaze of an overwhelming passion might well have the effect of. . . . Yes, I'm afraid you're right.'

'No, no, no, no, no,' said the publisher. 'My dear fellow, not at all. Not in the very least. I was only saying that to put you on your guard. After all, you can't afford to get rid of a woman who is essential to the plot. The thing would be madness.'

'Well, that's true, too,' said Martin. 'I certainly can't do without her. But I might make her die at the end – for instance, at the moment when her son-in-law, unable to contain himself any longer, forces matters to a climax. The tremendous torrent of emotion – passion, gratitude, remorse – would cause her to expire in a delirious embrace. She might easily burst a blood-vessel. I'm sure that would be medically sound.'

The publisher objected to this denouement on the grounds of its awe-inspiring banality, the more so since everyone would be expecting it, knowing Martin's tendencies. After a lengthy argument he got Martin to agree that at the worst the mother-in-law would simply fall into a coma, leaving the reader a ray of hope. Martin's obstinacy had annoyed him, and he asked sharply:

'What about the other characters? They're all right, I hope. I take it there's nothing the matter with Alfred Soubiron?'

Beneath his stern gaze Martin turned pink and hung his head.

'I'll tell you exactly how it is,' he said. 'Alfred Soubiron has always been the picture of health. He never knew a day's illness until just the other day, when he stupidly went and caught

congestion in one lung while waiting for a bus. But I must explain that this is necessary to the story. His wife's away, you see, and so he is nursed by his mother-in-law. It is the intimacy of the sick-room which reveals to him the nature of his passion and may even cause him to declare it.'

'Oh, well, so long as it's just part of the plot. The great thing now is to get him fit again as soon as possible. How's he coming along?'

Martin blushed again and murmured:

'Not too well, I'm afraid. I was working on the book this morning, and his temperature rose to a hundred and two point eight. I'm rather worried about him.'

'For God's sake!' cried the publisher. 'He isn't going to die, is he?'

'One never knows,' said Martin. 'There could be complications. The other lung might be affected. To tell you the truth, that's what I'm afraid of.'

The publisher managed to suppress his irritation. He said, in a manner that was still amiable:

'I'm sure it can't be as bad as all that. After all, if Soubiron dies the whole thing falls to bits. When you consider that – '

'Well, yes,' said Martin. 'But I've been thinking over the consequences of his death, and as a matter of fact it doesn't greatly worry me. Rather the opposite, in fact. With him dead the mother-in-law will be free to pursue what she holds to be her true destiny – that of a beautiful woman. So then we have the strange situation of this enchanting creature, passionately desired by men, listening to their burning avowals in all the serenity of her seventy-one years. As you will realise, such an attitude of superb and pitying indifference would be scarcely possible in the case of a man to whom she was already closely related. Thanks to Soubiron's death I am left with the eternal theme of unattainable beauty – but rejuvenated, transformed –

in a word, brought up to date! In this monstrous duality of nature and appearance I already seem to discern the lurking presence of a sinister threat, the nature of which is still not clear to me, but which is like the seed of death. . . .'

Huddled in his armchair, and rapidly turning purple, the publisher was regarding his author with a baleful eye. Martin noticed his apparent agitation, but thinking merely that he was shaken to the depths of his being by the beauty of the theme, he continued in a voice of exaltation:

'I see her suitors, and I'm sure you do too, vainly seeking access to that unresponsive heart and finally dying of consumption and despair. And finally she, too, grows weary of an existence so lacking in humanity, and comes to hate the spurious beauty of her face and body. One night, on returning from a reception at which an academician and a youthful diplomat have committed suicide at her feet, she empties a bottle of vitriol over herself and dies in unspeakable torments. There can be no doubt that this is the climax which the inner truth of the theme requires. And then – '

But Martin was allowed to proceed no further. Leaning across his desk, his publisher thumped it with such violence as to cause pens, draft-contracts and galley-proofs to bounce on to the floor, while he bellowed that he had heard enough.

'Not a halfpenny,' he shouted, 'not a brass farthing will I invest in this revolting massacre! And don't you come here asking me for advances! I should be mad to encourage you in your grisly pursuits. If you want any money, bring me a manuscript with every character glowing with health from the first page to the last! Not a single death, no disease and not even a passing thought of suicide! Until then there's nothing doing!'

Rightly incensed by the tyranny of his publisher, Martin abandoned his novel for more than a week. He even thought of

giving up literature altogether and becoming a newsboy or a waiter in a café as a gesture of protest against the abominable oppression of writers by the commercial exploiters of art and intellect. However, his anger presently abated and his need of money prompted him to discover honourable and even glorious reasons for Alfred Soubiron's recovery. His second lung was mercifully unaffected, and his temperature steadily improved. His convalescence was perhaps a little on the long side, but it took place in an atmosphere of simmering passion which furnished material for three excellent chapters. Satisfactory though this was, however, Martin still regretted having given up his first idea, and indeed suffered twinges of conscience, as though he had been untrue to the necessities of the drama over which he was presiding. Soubiron's recovery shocked him, just as the dazzling youthfulness of his mother-in-law, now that she was no longer threatened with death, seemed to him indecent. He had to be constantly on his guard against the temptation to give them a stab of rheumatism, harmless in itself, by way of reminding them, in their state of offensive good health, that all flesh is grass. But knowing only too well the slippery slope on to which even this trifling act of revenge would lead him, he concentrated his thoughts on the gratifying vision of the chequebook waving in his publisher's hand and thereby fortified his resolution. In any event, his unease of conscience was not wholly without beneficial effects, since it caused him to exercise an extreme rigour in the development of his plot. His publisher might deny him the use of accident, but he would make no concessions on the sphere of psychological truth.

One afternoon when he was seated at his desk engaged in a tumultuous chapter, Martin heard his front-door bell ring, and called, 'Come in.' A woman of impressive dimensions entered his study. Clad without elegance but in a well-to-do manner,

she carried an umbrella of sober aspect. Her face was soft and plump. Between her several chins and the V of her décolleté, her skin had that blotched and empurpled look that is to be seen in full-blooded women entering middle-life.

Being absorbed in the intricacies of a lengthy sentence, Martin made an apologetic gesture with his left hand, without raising his eyes or taking his pen from the paper. The visitor took a chair a short distance away and sat silently observing his profile by the light of the table-lamp. As she did so the expression of her placid, housewifely face changed, seeming to hesitate between anger and awe. At moments her gaze followed the writer's pen as it travelled over the paper, and her eyes in the half-darkness shone with an eager curiosity.

'Forgive me,' said Martin, rising. 'I took the liberty of finishing a sentence that had to be written in a single breath. It is one of the absurd things about our calling that we always think we are driven by inspiration.'

He then waited for her to say something equally polite in return, and indeed he saw her lips move, but nothing came from them except an unintelligible murmur. She seemed to be in a state of intense emotion. He apologised for keeping her in the dark and went and switched on the ceiling light. At first sight, in this brighter illumination, her face seemed familiar; but on studying her further he was convinced that he had never met her before. As their eyes met she said in a voice of melancholy irony:

'Of course, you don't recognise me?'

Martin repudiated this, but with a question in his voice, as though inviting her to jog his memory. The lady bowed her head over her umbrella, on which she had perceived a trace of dust. After brushing it away with her gloved hand she said, as she raised her eyes:

'I am Mme Alfred Soubiron.'

Martin was in no way astonished at being thus confronted by the wife of his hero. It is not unusual for a novelist to be visited by his characters, although they do not ordinarily manifest themselves in so substantial a form. But this was at least evidence that he had brought the lady to life with an incomparable mastery, and he found himself reflecting: 'If only the reviewers could be here, the ones who talk about my "artificial approach"! This would show them!' Meanwhile Mme Soubiron was saying with a sigh that rose from the depths of her corsage:

'I was sure you wouldn't recognise me. A married woman of forty-seven, faithful and devoted, a good housekeeper, one who has never failed in her duty or given rise to a breath of scandal – characters of this sort are of only minor importance, having no interest for the novelist. You prefer the sort of creature who . . .'

Shocked by the bitter tone in which she spoke, Martin made a gesture of protest. She went on hurriedly, fearing to offend him:

'I am not reproaching you. I know what artists are. M. Martin, I think you have probably guessed the purpose of my visit. When, two months ago, I left for the south of France with my young son, my mother had undergone her operation, but her face was still covered by bandages and no one knew what the result would be. Not until I returned home the day before yesterday did I learn that she had been transformed into a young woman. The change in her – merciful heavens! . . .'

'She *is* delicious, isn't she?' said Martin.

'Delicious . . . delicious! How can a woman of seventy-one be delicious? Mother is simply ridiculous. And what about me, looking twenty years older than her? I suppose you didn't think of that. But you should at least have been revolted at the idea of this shameful passion. Poor M. Soubiron, such a quiet, steady-

going man, and so affectionate – how he can possibly. . . . But what has been going on while I've been away? You know more about it than anyone.'

'Alas,' said Martin with a sigh, 'it is like the working of a remorseless destiny. No one wrote to tell you because they did not want to disturb you unduly, but as you know, M. Soubiron fell so gravely ill that his life was in danger. Your mother nursed him with the utmost devotion, and her constant presence at the bedside inevitably fostered a dangerous intimacy. No man of forty-five can remain unmoved by the spectacle of such youth and beauty seeming to exist for him alone. You must try to understand. In fairness to M. Soubiron it must be said that he fought against it with all his strength. Not until last Monday did he allow any hint of love to escape him. They had their usual game of dominoes after supper, and he deliberately lost, although the stake was twenty-five *sous*.'

Mme Soubiron's eyes widened and her hands trembled. She said in a shattered voice:

'Alfred lost on purpose? . . . This is the end!'

'No, no,' said Martin. 'You must not give up hope. Their passion has not yet been consummated. Moreover, your mother's spiritual state is one of extreme indecision. She is still searching her soul. Is she capable of a love equal in all respects to that of your husband? I personally would not yet venture to say that she is.'

'At least one thing is certain,' groaned Mme Soubiron, 'and that is that Alfred loves her. I have seen the way he looks at her. There are things a wife cannot fail to recognise.'

'It would be useless to try to pretend that he is not deeply in love,' agreed Martin. 'There is something profoundly moving and indeed beautiful in the intensity of his desire, the sheer, pent-up violence of a capacity for love that has never found its true outlet . . .'

Mme Soubiron went scarlet, flushing to the edge of her modest décolleté, and only the indignation which nearly choked her prevented her from uttering a furious protest. Martin, carried away with enthusiasm for his subject, and forgetting who his visitor was, went on talking as though to a fellow-craftsman.

'I will even admit,' he said with a deprecating smile, 'that despite my wish to remain strictly detached, this growth of a flaming desire that threatens to overthrow all barriers, to burst all bonds, does not leave me wholly unmoved. It touches a chord in me, I must confess. There are times when I am so affected by the heavily charged atmosphere that it is all I can do to restrain myself from hurrying on the moment of union. You will say that this is a risk every artist must face. True, but it is also a condition of the artist that he shall not be made of wood . . .'

Mme Soubiron had risen to her feet and now bore down on him clutching her umbrella. So threatening was her aspect that he retreated to the other side of his desk.

'Not made of wood!' she cried. 'You can be made of anything you like, Monsieur, but I forbid you to drag M. Soubiron into a life of lust and debauchery. I forbid it! If, as you say, you wish to hurry on the moment of union, then let it be the legitimate union of a husband and wife who have always lived together in perfect harmony. That would be a subject for a *respectable* novel, far better, let me tell you, than the vileness you conjure up! I have spiritual states too, Monsieur, and all the rest of it, and M. Soubiron has never had any reason to complain of them. So what is the point of this story of yours?'

Thus speaking she reached out a hand towards the sheets of manuscript scattered over the desk, and when Martin interposed his hand to restrain her she tried to push them on to the floor with the point of her umbrella, after which she dug it into

his ribs as though it were a sword. Finally, exhausted by her outburst of rage and fearing his anger, she sank back into her armchair and burst into tears.

As he contemplated her distress Martin could not escape a feeling of remorse. It was all very well to argue that the matter, however trying, was not a catastrophe for Mme Soubiron, since her husband was not going outside the family circle; but his conscience was still not at rest, and he could not help thinking that if Soubiron had been carried off in good time by pulmonary complications, his widow, with a State pension, might have lived the rest of her days in peace, cherishing the memory of a model husband. However, it was too late for that now.

Mme Soubiron dried her eyes and turned to him with a look of supplication.

'*Maître*,' she said (she called him *Maître* to flatter him), 'you see the extent of our unhappiness. Be generous, let your heart be touched. Consider the abyss of shame into which a respectable family must be plunged by a passion of this nature. My husband has been decorated with the Légion d'Honneur, he has always been highly thought of by his superiors. And consider the case of my poor mother, whose life has hitherto been beyond reproach. I realise, of course, that like all writers you are an anti-clerical, but since you know us better than anyone I may venture to remind you of the religious sentiments which have always played so large a part in our family life . . .'

Martin was listening with lowered head, visibly ill-at-ease.

'*Maître*, with your immense talent you have no need of such horrors to enable you to write a superb novel . . .'

'Of course not,' said Martin. 'But the truth is that I have less responsibility in the matter than you might think. An honest novelist is like God, he has only limited powers. His creatures are free. He can only suffer with them in their misfortunes and

regret that their prayers are in vain. He has over them only the power of life and death; and in the sphere of chance, where destiny sometimes allows him a small margin, he may be able to afford them modest consolations. But we can no more change our minds than can God himself. All things are ordained in the beginning, and once the arrow has been loosed it cannot be drawn back.'

'But you aren't going to tell me that your pen writes all by itself?'

'No, but I can't do exactly what I like with it, just as your husband, when he writes a report for his Ministry, cannot put down everything that comes into his head. I am under a scarcely less rigid compulsion, I assure you.'

But Mme Soubiron refused to believe in these bounds to his omnipotence. She said he had only to pick up his pen and write what she dictated. And when he shrugged his shoulders in despair she added sharply:

'So you won't do anything for me?'

'On the contrary,' said Martin, 'I'm most anxious to do everything in my power.'

'Well?'

'But what do you want me to do? Would you care to go for a sea voyage with your son? The distance would make your husband's infidelity easier to bear, if the worst – '

'In other words, go away and leave him free to do what he pleases! It would be as good as helping him!'

Martin considered Mme Soubiron for a moment in silence, as though weighing the various possibilities which Destiny allowed him in her case.

'A lover, now,' he said, without much conviction. 'Would you care to have a lover?'

Mme Soubiron rose from her chair, and gazing coldly at him, took her leave with a jerk of her chin.

'Poor woman,' he reflected after she was gone. 'There is only one way of bringing her suffering to an end and that is by arranging for her death. Never mind what the publisher says. One has to be human, after all. I'll give her another three weeks, just long enough to let her witness the consummation of the adultery. Her reactions will, I am sure, be most interesting.'

* * *

The Soubiron family was having supper. Leaning towards his mother-in-law, M. Soubiron said in a hoarse voice:

'Have another slice of veal. It'll do you good.'

She refused with a self-conscious smile, and a faint flush overspread her face. It was terrible but moving to observe the concupiscent gaze with which he devoured that exquisite feminine profile, those admirably moulded bare arms, that firm corsage pounding with emotion.

'Alfred,' said Mme Soubiron in acid tones, 'you shouldn't encourage Mother to over-eat. At her age it's far better for her to have a light meal in the evening.'

The Soubirons' son, a boy of nine, was so tactless as to ask his grandmother's age, and to persist until his father was obliged to rebuke him.

'I've told you before not to speak unless you're spoken to. Really, I've never known such a stupid child!'

A heavy silence fell in the mahogany-panelled dining-room. Soubiron was feeling for his mother-in-law's leg under the table. His eyes were rolling, his neck thickening in his collar. Finally, losing all self-control, he murmured:

'Armandine! Armandine!'

It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name, at least in the presence of the others, and at this fresh blow Mme Soubiron was seized with a fury of revolt, not so much

against her husband and her mother but against the doom overshadowing the family, the abominable power of Martin. She began to consider whether she might not resist this destiny and in some decisive manner defy its perpetrator. What was he, after all, this man who ordered their lives at the whim of his pen? A mere scribbler, a trifler owing his omnipotence to the acquiescence of his characters and their lack of spirit. Mme Soubiron felt that there must be some way for her to escape this sinister fate. Although it would doubtless serve little purpose to deny and execrate their creator, might it not be possible to evade his control and thwart his activities – for example, by placing oneself in a situation where the pen of the novelist refused to follow, by taking refuge outside reality and outside the ineluctable course of events ordained by the creator at the beginning – that is to say, in the realm of the absurd and unreal?

Mme Soubiron made a great effort of imagination. To the general astonishment she uttered a loud burst of laughter and, removing her shoe, put it on her plate. After which she snatched a slice of veal from the dish and thrust it down the front of her dress.

'How hungry I was!' she said, rubbing her stomach with a gesture of satisfied gluttony.

Her mother and husband exchanged startled glances. She took another slice of veal and then began to sing the refrain of the *Carmagnole.* But then she broke off abruptly, having suddenly thought that this foolishness was not really beyond all possibility and that Martin had probably intended it. Far from troubling him, she was simply adding another page to his novel. As the others clustered solicitously about her, asking if she felt quite well, she answered dispiritedly:

'You needn't be frightened. I was trying something, but it wasn't right. It didn't work.'

Perturbed nevertheless by this singular outburst, her husband curbed his shameful advances and was at pains to bring her into the conversation, which thereafter became quite animated. They talked about a cousin living in Clermont-Ferrand, the rise in taxes and a method of cooking sheep's tongue with bacon and mushrooms, and Mme Soubiron appeared to take the liveliest interest in all these matters, contributing to the discussion the simple home-truths and sturdy good sense that she had brought to the household as her dowry. But at moments, generally after speaking, she betrayed signs of nervous agitation and absence of mind. This was when she had the feeling of having said nothing that Martin had not authorised and approved. The more she thought about it, the more intolerable did her dependence upon him become.

All that night she stayed awake seeking the key to the problem. Such was her sense of outrage at the state of servitude in which she was kept by Martin that she almost forgot the drama which was shaking the family to its foundations. Her husband's rhythmic snoring, as he lay at her side, exasperated her, and she despised him for surrendering to his author without any desire to rebel.

She switched on the light to look at him as he lay sleeping, and it occurred to her that it would serve Martin right if she murdered him in his sleep. It might ruin the novel and destroy the whole fabric Martin had created. She went and got her husband's revolver out of the drawer, but then her heart failed her. Not even the thought that Martin was refusing his consent could goad her to the act, and she put the revolver back. In any case a moment's thought convinced her that Soubiron's death, had it occurred, would also have been in the natural order of events. It was not here that the solution was to be found.

She lay awake until daybreak, her thoughts intent upon

inspecting the bounds of the prison that enclosed her, while she sought the loophole that would afford her a way out; but she was confronted by a solid wall whichever way she turned. In the end she perceived that conscious thought, far from helping her, merely hemmed her in more tightly. On the other hand, when at moments of extreme weariness she lost the thread of her thoughts, she had a sense of being on the pathway of escape. Lying with her mind a blank, her thoughts stirring at random, she found herself suddenly at that frontier where Martin lost almost all control and authority. She seemed to be drawing near to safety and she had a sense of deliverance. But then, as a half-formed conscious thought re-established contact with reality, Martin took her again in his grip and locked all the doors of the prison.

Thereafter Mme Soubiron devoted her efforts to willing her liberty without thinking about it. Instead of growing exasperated and finding reasons for revolt against the tyranny of Martin, she merely repeated in her mind, sometimes moving her lips: 'I want to escape . . . to escape . . .'

During the week that followed Alfred Soubiron's passion waxed in intensity. Every evening he brought home a great bunch of roses which cost Heaven knew what.

'Some flowers for you, my dear,' he would say to his wife, while in scarcely less audible voice he murmured to his mother-in-law: 'For you, all for you, Armandine. . . .'

Mme Soubiron endured these outrages with a surprising patience, and scarcely even grew thinner. Now and then an explosion escaped her, but it happened less and less often. Profiting by her apparent indifference, Soubiron's attentions to his mother-in-law became more marked. One evening Mme Soubiron came upon him kissing the back of her neck while his hands clasped her bosom. She smiled kindly at the two of them and said:

'The towel-horses go on tip-toe. . . . There is a taste of Wednesday in the air. . . . We shall soon be using hairpins to hold our breath.'

* * *

Martin was busy working when his best friend, Mathieu Mathieu, the noted film critic, dropped in on him. Mathieu Mathieu brought with him a lady, known as la petite Jiji, whom he had collected in passing at the Edredon Bar. The two men talked for some time about the future of railways. Mathieu maintained that they would soon disappear, to be replaced entirely by road transport, which would be enormously profitable. Martin didn't believe it. He took the view that railways were still in their infancy. The stupendous potentialities of electrification were not yet fully realised. Jiji sat curled up in an armchair without joining in the debate. Finally she remarked, addressing herself more particularly to Mathieu Mathieu:

'What a shattering pair of bores you are, with your railways and your motor-coaches.'

'Hold your tongue!' said Mathieu angrily. 'Do you think you're in your own home? . . . My God, when I think that I've been dragging this hen-wit around with me for a whole year, and all on account of a pair of legs that happened to catch my eye one night when I was tight!'

'You're the one that ought to hold your tongue,' retorted Jiji. 'You've no business to go talking about my legs in front of strangers. Next thing you know, he'll be putting me in a novel.'

'What about a drop of *fine*?' said Martin soothingly. 'As it happens, I've just bought – '

'A pair of legs!' bellowed Mathieu, taking no notice. 'I have flung myself away on a pair of legs, my magnificent talent and everything I possess! It makes me sick. I wish to Christ a war

would break out, and a bloody good plague into the bargain. God almighty, how life stinks when one's in the middle of it!'

As though turning his back upon life, he strode over to the window, which gave on to a dark courtyard. Having recovered from his fit of melancholy he came back to the middle of the room, nodded at the scribbled sheets scattered over Martin's desk, and said:

'Is this thing of yours coming along all right?'

'Oh, yes – it's coming on.'

'You don't sound too pleased with it,' said Mathieu Mathieu.

'I'm not actually displeased. The novel's turning out as I meant it to – I can't complain. But – well, I told you what it was about, didn't I? . . . I wish you wouldn't spit on the floor. I've asked you before. The housemaid doesn't like it. . . . If you remember, I told you the subject – '

'That's quite right,' said Jiji. 'It's disgusting to spit on the floor. People pretend they're well brought-up, and all they do is – '

'It really doesn't matter,' said Martin. 'Sometimes one wants to spit and just doesn't think. I was hearing about an admiral's wife only the other day, a Countess Someone-or-other, who used to spit on the floor during meals.'

'Well I still think it's disgusting.'

'Will you for crying out loud put a sock in it!' yelled Mathieu Mathieu.

'Easy now,' said Martin. 'No need to get excited. Do you remember what my novel's about?'

'More or less. Something about a civil servant whose mother-in-law is having her face and other things lifted. Yes, I remember it now. Not much film value in it that I can see. Not enough movement. Well, anyway, what's the problem?'

'Well, nothing, really. But I've just had a rather unpleasant surprise. I think I mentioned Soubiron's wife to you, without saying much about her. She's what you might term the classic figure of a model housewife – forty-seven years old, robust, devoted, faithful and economical. You know the kind of thing – home-made jam, the *Figaro*, and a little tea-party once a month for the wives of her husband's colleagues. . . .'

'You're making my mouth water,' said Mathieu Mathieu. 'Why didn't I have the luck to meet a woman like that?'

'In short, such a thoroughly commonplace character, of whom there was so little to be expected, that I intended to keep her in the background as much as possible. I was really rather sorry I'd ever created her. My first surprise was when I found how unhappy she was. One doesn't realise what depths there may be in those bovine temperaments – a sort of virginity of suffering. . . . Still, you'll be able to read what I've written about all that. Wonderful stuff. But so as not to let her steal the whole book, and also out of sheer humanity, I was going to make her die at the moment when she learns that her husband has betrayed her. It would have been a matter of a fortnight – three weeks at the outside.'

'So you're still at your old game of killing them off. I'd like to know what right you have.'

'What right? The novelist's right, of course! I can't make my characters laugh when they feel like crying. I can't make them behave according to impulses which are not theirs, but I can always bring their lives to an end. Death is something that everyone carries with him at every moment, so that any moment I care to choose is the right one.'

'Well, possibly. And I've nothing against a death from time to time, just to make people think. But you don't want to overdo it.'

'Well, to come back to Soubiron's wife, her case is really

most curious. With her, suffering turned at once to a state of exalted anguish – obsession with Fate. You'd never have thought it, would you? But that's what happened. And one night she rebelled.'

'Rebelled against what? Against Fate?'

'Nothing of the kind, old boy. Our Madame Soubiron isn't such a fool. She knows there's no such thing as Fate or Destiny, that they're only figures of speech. No, she rebelled against God. Because God exists. God is *me*, Martin – I'm God! Here's what she said to herself: "God has created me in all my parts and I cannot make him alter me. Indeed, he refuses to interfere in my life. He maintains simply that I am obliged in all things to behave according to the workings of a particular mechanism which he calls my inner truth. So I shall break out of myself." ... And yesterday evening Mme Soubiron succeeded in breaking out of herself. She went mad. I fancy her husband will have to put her in a mental home within the next few days. In any case, she has escaped me completely.'

'Well, you can still bump her off. That's what you meant to do anyway.'

'But no, that's exactly what I can't do any longer! That's what's so infuriating. In all honesty, I can't do it. How am I to know whether the mad are mortal at every instant of day and night? Who can tell me? Perhaps they have moments when they are invulnerable. Perhaps they are always invulnerable, and die only in a flash of sanity. I once heard a doctor say that madness restores some sick people to health and gives others a vitality they never possessed before. At all events, I am not going to run the risk of causing someone to die in defiance of natural laws. So I've simply got to put up with it. Mme Soubiron has left my novel, or if you like, she exists in it only as a memory. It's such a nuisance. There's no one else I can kill. My publisher probably wouldn't have minded the death of a minor

character, but he'll never accept that of Soubiron or his mother-in-law, and seeing that I need the money. . . . Only yesterday I tried to get him to allow me to polish off Soubiron, but he was adamant.'

Mathieu Mathieu gazed pensively at Jiji, who had fallen asleep in her armchair while reading the evening paper. His gaze travelled to a silk-clad leg, uncovered above the knee. It was a very pretty leg, and he could not take his eyes off it. Finally he made a furious gesture, as though tearing off the shackles, and inclining his head towards Martin he said in a low voice:

'Listen, old man, couldn't you bring Jiji into your novel? She'd only be a minor character, if that. I'm sure your publisher would have no objection . . . in short – well – you could do what you liked with her, you see.'

'People can't just walk into a novel of mine as though it were a railway station,' said Martin.

'No, of course not. But after all, we're old friends. As a favour to me. . . .'

'You're asking something very serious. I don't know if you realise. For one thing, it's an extremely delicate operation. One can't force her into it. She would have to be persuaded – lured in, so to speak. Not at all easy. And really, when you come right down to it – poor little Jiji! I wouldn't want anything to happen to her.'

'Martin, I beseech you, don't deny me this. Don't refuse to rescue me. Think what a wretched life I lead!'

'But, my dear old boy, it wouldn't help you in the least. I know you. I know how much those legs mean to you. You've got them under your skin, and that's all there is about it. I know exactly what would happen. The moment Jiji came into the novel you'd follow her. And then what? You'd be an even more minor character.'

'You don't mean to say you'd kill me off too?' exclaimed Mathieu Mathieu.

'Well, there's no telling, is there?' said Martin, shrugging his shoulders. 'It would depend on circumstances.'

Mathieu Mathieu, after staring at his best friend in horror, sprang from his chair and went and shook Jiji.

'Get up, you slut, we're going! I am a man accursed! I haven't a friend in the world – nothing – nothing but a blasted pair of legs! I am an orphan of the storm, a pariah, an outcast, a child of the damned. And writers are nothing but bloody butchers! Come along, darling, you go first. He wanted to murder me. Jiji, I'm afraid. God knows what he'll be up to next, in his infernal novels. The man frightens me. For God's sake cover up your legs!'

* * *

Mme Soubiron was in a mental home and the boy had been sent as a boarder to a Jesuit school. During the first days of his wife's absence Alfred Soubiron asked himself constantly whether he dared take advantage of this tragic situation to break down his mother-in-law's resistance. And with the utmost hypocrisy he answered himself that although he could never have inflicted this humiliation on his wife if she had retained her reason, in her present condition the need to spare her suffering did not arise. Needless to say, he did not fail to make use of this argument to his mother-in-law.

'No, no, it's impossible!' protested Armandine. 'You forget that I am her mother.'

'Exactly,' said Soubiron. 'So isn't it your duty to replace her in the home?'

'I have no right to do so. Don't torture me, Alfred. It would be a dreadful thing.'

'I know, I know,' said Soubiron, still bursting with hypocrisy. 'We are undergoing a severe trial, but God will aid us.'

At these words Armandine sighed, wondering whether Martin was really resolved to carry the situation to its logical conclusion. She did not like to think so. Belonging, as she did, to an earlier generation, her ideas concerning novelists were necessarily different from those of the present day, and she was far from suspecting, poor soul, the inexorable rigour of the laws of objectivity and fearless realism by which their genius is governed. She supposed, in her innocence, that after devising situations of a possibly perilous nature it was the novelist's duty so to arrange matters as to bring about an exemplary ending. This belief caused her to remain obdurate, and Soubiron was quick to realise that he could not hope to achieve his aim by persuasion alone. Accordingly he changed his tactics. Upon returning from the office he would rush at her with a wild ferocity, hoping to overwhelm her by surprise; but being slim and supple she always managed to get away and would flee from him through the apartment. The reader must turn to Martin's novel for the account of those breathless pursuits, the cries, the overturned furniture, the cat's dinner spilt, the vases crackling beneath their feet.

'Armandine, I *desire* you!' the male would bellow, adding horrible obscenities.

'Alfred, my beloved, you're crucifying me!' she would moan in reply, leaping nimbly over an armchair.

Mercifully, Armandine was able to get her breath during the hours when Soubiron was at the office; but, a prey to melancholy reflections, she found solitude weighing heavily upon her. It was a relief when one day she received an invitation to the Gala of the Flying Pen, presided over by an illustrious author and having a leading publisher as vice-president. Filled with gratitude to Martin, who had sent her the invitation, she hurried to her dressmaker.

The Gala of the Flying Pen was a literary function of the highest distinction and brilliance. Speeches were delivered extolling the progress of Thought, and persons of wit and culture said unforgettable things while sipping champagne. Armandine's entrance gave rise to a general murmur of admiration, the men remarking that they had never seen a woman with so much sex-appeal. The vice-president, who was none other than Martin's publisher, could not take his eyes off her. Several other novel heroines were present, and were being proudly introduced by their authors, but not one was a patch on Armandine.

Martin's publisher came to greet her, and never had his compliments to Martin been so sincere. After a few minutes of conversation Martin excused himself on the grounds of an urgent appointment and left them together. The publisher led Armandine to the buffet, where they drank several glasses of champagne. He forgot all about his duties as vice-president, and by the time the party was over he was deeply in love.

That same evening Martin received a telephone-call.

'Hallo? Is that you, Martin, my dear fellow? This is your publisher speaking. I felt that I really must congratulate you again. My dear chap, what a wonderful creation! Exquisite! Superb! Such charm, such simplicity, and so true to life! One of the great characters of fiction, my dear Martin, I have not a doubt of it. A character destined to live in the reader's memory.'

'You really think so? It's extremely nice of you to say so.'

'There's just one thing. I'm thinking about publication. It would be very helpful to me – simply for purposes of publicity, you understand – to have the opportunity of studying the lady a little more closely. Do you think I could possibly see her?'

'Well, good heavens, yes, why not? I always leave her free in the afternoons. She certainly wouldn't refuse to receive you.'

'That's most kind of you, my dear fellow. . . . Hullo? I said, you're most kind. . . .'

'There's nothing else, is there?' asked Martin in a strained voice. 'The other characters, for instance. . . . There's nothing else you'd like me to do?'

After a slight pause the voice of the publisher answered with a certain hesitation:

'Er – no, nothing else . . . Thank you, my dear fellow, a thousand times.'

Martin hung up with an air of extreme disappointment. He dressed and went to the Edredon Bar. Mathieu Mathieu was hotly defending his last five hundred francs against Jiji, who wanted to buy herself a sports suit. He was arguing that civilisation was in peril and likely to disappear in the near future if the best people did not set an example by returning to a simpler way of life, even to austerity.

'You take me, for example,' he was saying, 'the greatest film critic in Paris and probably in Europe. I ask you, did you ever see a dirtier or more worn-out tie than the one I'm wearing? And what's more, I've been wearing it for the last two years, although not for lack of money. It's only three weeks since Mammoth Productions slipped me three thousand for praising their latest stinker. I could have bought a whole drawerful of ties if I'd wanted to, but I didn't because I know that to live simply is to be pure and strong and give free rein to the life of the spirit.'

'You'd sooner spend the money on drink,' said Jiji, 'and anyway, I don't see what could be more simple than a sports suit.'

She was embarking for the tenth time on a description of the particular suit she had in mind, all pure wool, when Martin arrived. She kept herself bottled up while greetings were being exchanged; but just as she was about to break out again Mathieu Mathieu kicked Martin under the table and said:

'By the way, what about your rent? Have you managed to raise the money?'

'My rent? ... Oh, my rent. ... I'd rather you didn't talk about it. I don't know where to turn. If I haven't found the money by tomorrow morning my landlord's going to put the bailiffs in. I suppose, old boy, you couldn't by any chance ...'

'Sorry, old man. Anyway, I've only got five hundred, and that wouldn't be enough.'

'But it would! It would just do. I know where I can put my hands on the other two hundred. Oh, won't you lend it to me? I swear I'll pay it back. Think of my furniture, Mathieu, my knick-knacks, my little odds and ends. ...'

Jiji, growing red in the face, watched Mathieu while he listened, hesitating and shaking his head. At length he got out the five hundred franc note and handed it to Martin, saying with a sigh:

'I can't bear to think of an old friend in trouble. It's something I just can't bear.'

With tears of indignation in her eyes, Jiji got up and left the table without saying good-bye or even powdering her nose. When she was gone Martin returned the five hundred francs, and the two friends settled down to chat about their respective vocations. Mathieu Mathieu said that he had just entered the initial phase of an evolutionary period which looked like lasting a considerable time.

'The fact is, old boy, we don't realise how much our talent owes to commonplace necessities, the mere implements of our trade. Until last week I had always written my articles with a fountain-pen. Sheer force of habit, and perhaps a touch of superstition. But then last week Jiji broke my pen just when I was sitting down to do my article. It was eleven o'clock at night and the copy had to be in next morning, so there was no chance

to buy a new one. I had to go round to the café and borrow a pen. I don't know if you know what café pens are like – a long steel point, like a rusty hypodermic, and – '

'I know, I know.'

'Well anyway, I wrote my piece as usual, and what's so queer is that at the time I didn't notice anything out of the way. It wasn't until I came to read the stuff in print that I had a shock. My whole way of writing had changed. I'd developed a sort of piercing style that went right through to the heart of the matter and fairly tore it apart. Curious, isn't it? You aren't expecting anything, and suddenly, bingo, you're off on a new tack. Well, that's how it is with me. Mark you, I'd always had a feeling that fountain-pen nibs weren't sharp enough – anyway, not for criticism. Poetry, now, that's quite a different thing. If I ever get round to writing the poem I'm thinking about I shall certainly use a fountain-pen.'

'You're thinking of writing a poem? You never told me,' said Martin reproachfully.

'Oh, just turning it over in my mind. The poetic Muse looks to me so sick in these days, with her bulging brow and her little, foxy eye, that I sometimes shed tears into my pillow just thinking about her. I'd like to write an epic that would put some flesh on the old girl's bones. The thing would be based on the obscure consciousness of the vegetable world – or if you prefer, the organic intelligence. After centuries of being cut down to make wardrobes and other articles of furniture, the trees of the forest end by becoming aware of their destiny. So they adapt themselves; that is to say, instead of growing up straight they grow in the shape of a Henri II dresser, or a Louis XVI commode, or a Directory table. Men don't need to cut them down any more, they find it simpler to go and live in the forest. You see what I mean? The grand reconciliation with Nature!'

Lost in admiration, Martin gravely nodded his head. Mathieu Mathieu went on:

'But of course a bald summary like that doesn't tell you very much. Here are a few lines, just to put you in the picture:

'Pent in the bondage of her cage of gold
The magnate's daughter sighs for green retreats
Where town-dulled eyes ecstatic may behold
The flowing sap in Nature's bedroom-suites.'

'That's fine,' said Martin. 'That's really very fine.'

Pink with pleasure, Mathieu Mathieu gazed gratefully at his friend, and after clasping him by the hand he asked:

'What about your novel? Have you found anyone to kill off?'

Martin shook his head. No, he had found no one. Mathieu Mathieu was filled with compassion. Poetry always caused him to overflow with kindness. An idea occurred to him, and in a voice quivering with sacrificial fervour he said:

'I'll come into your novel if you like.'

'Oh, no!' cried Martin. 'No, really! For one thing, you have your poem to write. And anyway, my dear old boy, I could never possibly agree to it. Think how upset I should be!'

There was a silence. Mathieu Mathieu was deeply touched by his own generosity. Martin, meanwhile, was thinking it over.

'Mark you,' he said, 'I shouldn't have the slightest trouble in disposing of you. For instance, in the chapter I'm now writing I could very easily – '

'Well, but as you don't want to do it we needn't talk about it any more,' said Mathieu Mathieu rapidly. 'How long is it going to take you to finish the book?'

'I'm nearly there. A week or ten days at the outside. But I'm

hoping that between now and then something will happen. I'm expecting a visit.'

* * *

The visit which Martin was expecting seemed to be delayed, and he grew daily more anxious. His novel was now very near its end, and he was finding Alfred Soubiron increasingly unrestrainable except during his crises of despair. At these times he was like a little child, huddled weeping at the feet of Armandine. The unhappy woman had been driven to the extreme limit of her resistance.

At length, after ringing up to say that he was coming, Martin's publisher called on him one evening after dinner. Martin noted that he was not looking at all well, and that he seemed shrunken in his clothes.

'Sit down,' said Martin. 'Well, this is a great surprise. As it happens, I was meaning to come and see you tomorrow, to talk business. I badly need an advance.'

'We'll talk about that when you come. I don't know how your account stands, but I think I may be able to manage something.'

'I'm quite sure you can. Only yesterday evening I ran into a publisher whose name I'd better not mention, and he spoke with the greatest enthusiasm of Armandine, whom he had met at the Gala of the Flying Pen. He said he was sure that after a success like that you must have come across with something handsome. I didn't like to undeceive him, but I must say I was rather embarrassed at being seen out in such a shabby suit.'

'You don't have to tell me his name,' said Martin's publisher. 'I can guess who you mean. I suppose he made you an offer?'

'Well, not exactly a firm offer, but – '

'You want to watch out with that chap. He's on the verge of bankruptcy anyway. He isn't the only one who tries to cash in

on the heavy sacrifices I make in launching new authors. He'll promise the earth, but precious little ever comes of it. . . . At the same time, my dear fellow, if you're hard-pressed I'm perfectly ready . . .'

The publisher got out his cheque-book, uttering a routine roar of protest when Martin mentioned the sum of thirty thousand francs. But he did not resist very stubbornly during the argument that followed. Clearly he was anxious to make himself agreeable to Martin, who ended by pocketing a cheque for fifteen thousand, which was five thousand more than he had dared to hope for.

'I came to talk to you about your novel,' said the publisher when this matter was settled. 'I'm most interested in your characters, and particularly in Armandine. She's an extremely charming woman with whom I feel I have much in common. You have been kind enough to let her have her afternoons off in order to afford me the opportunity of studying her, and I'm very grateful to you. But unhappily Armandine has not been as responsive to my efforts to get to know her as I had hoped. She remains aloof, if you see what I mean. I have not been able to get really close to her.'

'You mustn't blame her,' said Martin. 'She has so many preoccupations.'

'Well, that's just what I wanted to talk about. If I have rightly understood the hints she has let fall, she feels herself bound by a passion which she does not share. She has no wish to yield to her son-in-law, but at the same time she feels that she would be acting disloyally to him if she turned her attention elsewhere.'

'It is a scruple that does her credit,' said Martin.

'Oh, most certainly, although on the other hand Soubiron's persistence is utterly disgraceful, when you come right down to it, and deserving of the utmost . . .'

The publisher here fell silent, seeming to wait for Martin to lead the way in developing a train of thought which he scarcely cared to formulate. But Martin appeared not to understand, and so he eventually resumed in a playful tone:

'My dear fellow, I daresay you remember the first time we talked about your novel? We had quite an argument on the subject of the plot, and I seem to recall that I took a somewhat uncompromising attitude. . . .'

He gave Martin an affectionate pat on the shoulder, and went on with a merry laugh:

'Of course, I know you weren't in the least offended. And anyway, anything I may have said at the time is naturally not to be taken as final. It goes without saying that you're absolutely free to do as you think best, and if you feel that someone ought to die. . . . Well, to tell you the truth, I've been thinking about this Soubiron. He really is a bit of an encumbrance, isn't he? I don't mind admitting, my dear fellow, that his disappearance would please me as much as it would you.'

Martin nodded in agreement, but then said in a voice of melancholy:

'What a pity you came so late. I finished the novel yesterday evening. I could prolong Armandine's resistance no longer. Her son-in-law's frenzy overwhelmed her in the end, and she yielded. I'm bound to say it is a wonderful scene, profoundly moving. She undresses with an exquisite simplicity, and then . . . But you'll be able to read it for yourself. I mustn't spoil it for you.'

The publisher had turned pale and haggard at the news. He stammered:

'Couldn't you add another chapter?'

'Impossible,' said Martin.

He got the manuscript out of a drawer and showed it to him.

'Here's the last page. As you see, beneath the words, ". . . the throbbing of an endless passion. . . ." I have written, "THE END".'

There was no denying the fact. For a time the publisher was silent, brooding over his disappointment. Then, as Martin returned the manuscript to its drawer, he said sharply, without much hope but more for the sake of principle:

'Give me back that cheque!'

'Ask me something possible,' said Martin. 'I desire nothing more than to please you. But you have no need to despair. Time is on your side. I have taken leave of my characters, but their lives will go on. Anything can happen. Soubiron has had congestion in one lung already – perhaps he'll get it in both next time. Or Armandine may grow tired of him. You have only to persevere . . .'

'No, no, I feel that for me the tale is ended,' sighed the publisher. 'Have you thought of a title?'

'Not yet.'

'To please me, will you call it *Armandine*?'

'Certainly.'

Under the title of *Armandine* the novel had an enormous success. The fact that there was not a single death in it amazed readers. Within six months it had sold seven hundred and fifty thousand copies in France alone. Martin was able to buy several new suits and a pair of shark-skin shoes. And he gave his best friend, Mathieu Mathieu, a very handsome fountain-pen, thereby enabling him to embark on his great epic and save poetry from utter decay.

The Seven-League Boots

GERMAINE BUGE left Mlle Larisson's apartment after doing two hours' 'thorough cleaning' under the old maid's critical eye. It was four o'clock of a December afternoon, and the temperature had been below freezing-point for two days. Her coat did little to protect her. It was of thin material, a mixture of wool and cotton, and so worn as to be scarcely more than the appearance of a coat. The winter wind blew through it as through a wire grill. Perhaps it also blew through Germaine, who seemed to have not much more substance or reality than the coat itself. She was a frail shadow of a woman with a small, narrow, harassed face, one of those beings whose poverty and unobtrusiveness seem to bear witness to an act of charity on the part of Providence, as though they lived only by reason of the slightness of their demands upon life. Men did not notice her as they passed her in the street, women very rarely. Shopkeepers did not remember her name, and almost the only people who knew her were those who employed her.

Germaine hurried up the steep part of the Rue Lamarck. As she reached the corner of the Rue Mont-Cenis she met a number of schoolboys running down the slope. But the exodus was only beginning. Outside the school, at the foot of the big, stone stairway which climbs the hill of Montmartre, the released children were still clustered together in a noisy, compact

group. Germaine took up her stand at the corner of the Rue Paul-Féval and stood watching for Antoine. Within a few minutes the crowd had dispersed, scattering along the streets, and she was perturbed at not seeing him. Only half a dozen youngsters remained, chattering together about sport and delaying the moment of separation which would take them all in different directions. Germaine went up and asked if any of them knew Antoine Buge, and if they had seen him. The smallest, who looked about the same age, raised his cap and said:

'Buge? Yes, I know him. I didn't see him go, but I know he left one of the first, with Frioulat.'

Germaine waited another minute and then turned away in disappointment, retracing her steps.

Meanwhile Antoine, at the other end of the Rue Paul-Féval, had seen his mother waiting for him. It had given him an uncomfortable and guilty feeling. Indeed, while still hiding among his group of companions he wondered aloud whether he should run after her.

'You can if you like,' said Frioulat coldly. 'Anybody who's afraid can go home. Only then, of course, you won't be a member of the gang any more.'

So Antoine stayed. He didn't want anyone to think he was afraid. And besides, he very much wanted to be a member of the gang, even though their leader was pretty tough with them. Frioulat was wonderful. Although he wasn't any taller than Antoine, he was strong and quick and never frightened of anything. Once he had even told a man off. Baudin and Rogier had been there; it wasn't just a story.

The gang, at present composed of five members, was awaiting a sixth, Huchemin, who lived in that street and had gone home to deposit his satchel and those of his comrades.

At length he came back to them, making their number complete. Antoine, still rather unhappy, glanced in the direction of

the school, thinking of his mother's solitary return to their lodging in the Rue Bachelet. Frioulat guessed his thoughts and had the shrewdness to entrust him with a delicate mission.

'You can go ahead and scout. We'll see if you're any good at it. But watch out – it's dangerous!'

Pink with pride, Antoine went at a run up the Rue des Saules and stopped at the first crossing. Evening was coming on, and the number of people in the street was not large – to be exact, two old women and a stray dog. Antoine returned to the main body and made his report in a formal voice.

'I wasn't attacked, but it looks like we might have trouble in the Rue Saint-Vincent.'

'I thought as much,' said Frioulat, 'but I've taken precautions. Right, now we'll start. Everybody in single file behind me, and keep close to the wall. And nobody's to break ranks without orders, even if I'm attacked.'

Baranquin, a very small, fair-haired boy who was on his first campaign, showed signs of nerves and wanted Antoine to tell him about the dangers which they were shortly to encounter. He was sharply called to order by Frioulat, and took his place in the file without another word. The advance up the Rue des Saules was effected without incident. Several times Frioulat ordered his men to lie flat on the icy pavement, without indicating the nature of the peril that threatened them. He himself remained standing, utterly fearless, like a commander of legend, gazing keenly about him with his hands making binoculars over his eyes. No one ventured to say anything, but the others felt that he was overdoing it a little. As they passed the end of the Rue Cortot he fired two shots from his catapult along it, but did not condescend to explain his reasons. The party came to a halt at the crossing of the Rue Norvins, and Antoine took advantage of the pause to ask what had happened in the Rue Cortot.

'I haven't time for talk,' said Frioulat tersely. 'I'm responsible for the safety of the expedition.' And he went on: 'Baranquin, you're to reconnoitre as far as the Rue Gabrielle and then report back. At the double.'

It was now nearly dark. By no means reassured, little Baranquin went off at a run, and while they awaited his return the chief got a piece of paper out of his pocket and studied it with a frown.

'Pipe down, will you?' he said to Huchemin and Rogier, who had ventured to raise their voices. 'Can't you see I'm thinking?'

Presently they heard the patter of Baranquin's goloshes over the pavement as he came scampering back. He had seen nothing suspicious in the course of his patrol, and in all innocence he said so. This disregard of the rules of the game, showing a lack of the true spirit of make-believe, was extremely shocking to Frioulat, who exclaimed bitterly to the others:

'I've been commanding troops all my life, but I've never known a bonehead like this one.'

His companions fully understood and sympathised with the outburst, but since they all had their grievances against Frioulat they made no response. After a pause Antoine remarked:

'All the same, if he didn't see anything I don't see how you can blame him for saying so.'

Huchemin, Rogier and Naudin all supported this, and the chief was somewhat shaken.

'Well, if we're only going to say what's true we might as well give up playing altogether,' he said.

Antoine had to concede in his heart that he was right, and he was sorry that he had undermined his commander's authority. Above all, he was ashamed of having come forward as the defender of common sense against the splended flights of im-

agination which seemed to constitute the very essence of heroism. He started to say something to make up for it but Frioulat instantly cut him short.

'You shut up! It's a pity you didn't go home with your mother instead of coming along and upsetting discipline. You've made us a quarter of an hour late already.'

'All right,' said Antoine. 'I don't want to make you late. So I won't belong to the gang any more.'

He turned and made off in the direction of the Rue Gabrielle, accompanied by Baranquin. The others hesitated. Naudin and Huchemin decided to follow the dissidents, but at a distance. Rogier was tempted to go with them, but not liking to break away openly from the chief he moved off more slowly, as though he were waiting for him. Frioulat was the last to leave the spot, and he did so crying:

'All right, you scabs, you can do what you like! I'm resigning. But you'll be sorry!'

The gang, now in four separate sections spread over a hundred yards, moved towards the expedition's destination, which was in a portion of the Rue Élysée-des-Beaux-Arts, enclosed between two sharp turns. The narrow street was dark and shut-in, as deserted as the summit of Montmartre.

As they drew near to the spot Antoine and Baranquin went more slowly, and the party closed up like an accordion. At the first turn the street was cut across by a deep trench marked with a red light. The work must have been carried out in the course of the past two days, because there had been no sign of it two evenings before, on the occasion of the first expedition. It was an element of surprise and terror of which much might have been made, and which caused them to regret that the game had been abandoned. The trench had to be crossed by means of a narrow plank with ropes on either side. Much though he wanted to bend down and examine the digging, Antoine did not

stop, fearing that the others would suspect him of waiting for them.

The six of them came together a few yards farther on, outside the curio shop. It was a small establishment of which the paintwork looked as though it had been deliberately scratched, and which bore no name. To compensate for this, the window contained numerous showcards, of which the largest read: 'Bargains for connoisseurs.' Another ran: 'Only the rich are allowed credit.' Each of the articles on show was accompanied by an historical description, highly suspect as to its accuracy, inscribed on a slip of cardboard. 'Outdoor writing-desk of Queen Hortense' referred to a small, white-wood kitchen table scoured with *eau de Javel*. There was also a coffee-mill which had belonged to the Du Barry, a soapbox that had been Marat's, a bowler hat worn by Félix Faure, the pipe-stem of the Reine Pomaré, the fountain-pen with which the Treaty of Campo-Formio had been signed, and numerous other objects treated in the same spirit – culminating in a leather football-cover which was described a 'Cunning Device, once the property of Pope Joan'. The boys saw no fraud in all this, and never doubted that the dealer had collected in his shop the modest litter of history. The Campo-Formio fountain-pen was perhaps a little surprising, but their knowledge of the famous treaty was only slight. Certainly the idea never occurred to them that a shopkeeper might indulge in facetiousness in the pursuit of his trade. The inscriptions written in his own hand were necessarily true, as true as print, and to be accepted as a guarantee of authenticity. But it was not for the purpose of admiring historical relics that they had organised this long-range expedition. A single object in the middle of the window claimed their passionate interest. It was a pair of boots accompanied by a slip of cardboard bearing the simple words, 'Seven-League Boots' – words upon which the names of Campo-Formio, Marat, Félix

Faure, Napoleon, Louis-Philippe and other great historical figures conferred an almost incontestable authenticity. Perhaps the six boys did not absolutely believe that they had only to put on the boots in order to cover seven leagues at a single stride. They could even suspect that the adventure of Hop-o'-my-Thumb was only a fairy-tale; but not being positively certain of this they did not find it hard to compromise with the suspicion. As a concession to probability, and perhaps also to avoid the risk of seeing faith destroyed by reality, they agreed that the magical powers of the boots must have been weakened in the course of time, and might even have been destroyed altogether. But concerning their genuineness there could be no shadow of doubt. It was a matter of history, and the whole display bore witness to the fact. Moreover, they were strangely handsome, and of a surprising richness in contrast with the other objects in the window, nearly all of which were shoddy and ugly. Of fine, supple, black patent-leather, made to fit a child about their own age, they were lined with white fur that spread over the edge of the uppers to form a snowy border. The boots themselves had a proud, high-stepping elegance which was a little dismaying, but the border of fur invested them with the grace of a tender fantasy.

Antoine and Baranquin, the first to arrive, had taken up their position opposite the boots, noses pressed to the window, scarcely saying anything. Their delight was almost beyond expression, resembling a dream of enchantment in which from time to time one has a slightly painful reminder of life waiting outside. Donning the seven-league boots, Antoine embarked upon a confused and splendid adventure, and then, thinking of his mother and the garret whither she had returned alone, he caught his breath in a moment of remorse, taking a backwards glance at the life that awaited him on the side of the window on which he stood, so close to it in the wintry darkness that reality

blew a little patch of mist on the pane through his mouth.

Beyond the boots, the children at moments caught a glimpse of the curio dealer, the purveyor of these marvels. The interior of the shop, like the display-window, was lighted by an unshaded bulb hanging on its flex, of which the dim yellow glare made it difficult to distinguish objects very clearly.

So far as could be judged from outside, the shopkeeper was a very little old man with a round, smooth face without wrinkles or pronounced features. He wore a high, starched collar, a tightly buttoned jacket and knee-breeches with cycling stockings pulled up over his withered legs. Although he was alone in the shop the sound of his shrill voice was to be heard, always with a note of irritation. Now and then he darted across the floor in a state of sudden, extreme agitation that caused him positively to leap, but for the most part he stayed seated beneath the electric bulb, facing a large stuffed bird, doubtless a heron, with which he seemed to be conducting a most vigorous dispute. Baranquin went so far as to affirm that he had seen the bird move and turn upon the old man with a threatening gesture. Anything was possible in that stronghold of the seven-league boots.

The gang was now again united, lined up at the window with all eyes fixed upon the boots. Frioulat alone remained a pace or two in the rear, gazing at the row with a scornful smile while he muttered to himself.

'They can go on staring at the boots all night if they like. It just makes me laugh. Because I had a plan. But you can't have a plan without a leader – you can't have anything.'

Antoine, whose revolt had led to all the other desertions, could not doubt that these remarks were addressed particularly to himself. Although it seemed prudent to ignore them and keep silent, he found this unsatisfactory. He wanted to do something splendid and heroic which would render him the one

most worthy to wear the seven-league boots. Moreover, the rest of the row seemed to expect something of the sort from him. Rogier and Baranquin were gazing at him hopefully. His heart began to thump, but gradually he summoned up his courage. Finally he left the row, passed in front of Frioulat without looking at him, and went towards the door of the shop. The eyes followed him with admiration. The glass pane in the door, broken in two places, was covered by a bedroom rug fixed on the inside and bearing the label, 'Flying Carpet of the Thief of Bagdad'. In great trepidation Antoine turned the handle and timidly pushed the door half-open. What he then saw and heard kept him rooted to the threshold. Standing in the middle of the shop, with his hands on his hips and his eyes gleaming, the shopkeeper was confronting the stuffed bird and talking to it in the voice of an angry little girl. Antoine heard him squeak:

'Well, at least say definitely what you mean. I'm sick and tired of your habit of always hinting at things. In any case, I refuse to accept your argument. Show me your documents, produce your evidence. Aha! You don't like that, do you? Well?'

The old man then fell into an attitude of lofty silence while he awaited a reply. Sinking his head with its round, apple-smooth face between his shoulders, and seeming to shrink into the high, stiff collar which enveloped him almost to the ears, he stood glancing at the bird and plucking at his mouth with an air of insulting sarcasm. Suddenly he executed a leap forward, and shouted, brandishing his fist under the bird's beak:

'I forbid you to say it! It's infamous! You're insulting the Queen. I will have nothing said against Isabel of Bavaria – nothing, do you hear me?'

Thereupon he proceeded to stalk round the bird with furious gestures, talking in a low voice. It was while he was doing this that, glancing up, he noticed the figure of Antoine in the doorway. After examining him with an air of mistrust he advanced

upon him with long strides, head thrust forward and shoulders rounded, as though he hoped to spring upon him unawares. But Antoine, hastily slamming the door, gesticulated to his comrades and sounded the alarm in a voice of such urgency that it startled them all.

Seeming to reconstitute itself under his leadership, the gang followed him, bursting with questions, until they came to a stop a dozen yards from the shop. Frioulat, who had also made a movement of retreat, pulled himself together and remained still standing in front of the seven-league boots.

The shopkeeper had drawn aside a corner of the rug, and with his nose to the glass was staring into the street, paying especial attention to Antoine's group. The boys glanced sidelong at him while they talked in undertones. Finally he let the rug fall and disappeared. Frioulat had had the boldness to remain standing in the light cast by the window while he gazed at them. Now he turned towards the group, which perhaps thought it was again becoming a gang, and said disdainfully:

'You needn't have run away, he wasn't going to eat you. But it's always like that when there isn't a chief. Somebody thinks he'll be clever and go first, but then at the last minute he gets in a funk. Well, all I do is just laugh.'

'No one's stopping you from going in,' said Huchemin. 'Why don't you, if you're so much cleverer than anyone else?'

'It's just what I'm going to do,' said Frioulat.

He went up to the door and, without hesitating, giving it a brisk shove, he flung it almost wide open. But as he was about to cross the threshold he drew back with a yell of fright. A bird, larger than himself, which had been hiding behind the door, had leapt at him uttering a strange squawking cry in which there was a hint of a human voice.

The gang was already scattering, and Frioulat bolted at top speed without even looking round. With the bird in his arms the

old man came as far as the doorway, and after uttering a final screech, which completed the stampede, turned back into his shop.

Frioulat, running like mad, caught up with the others at the corner. None of them remembered the trench which they had crossed by means of a plank only a quarter of an hour before. It lay just beyond the corner. Rogier saw it as he reached the brink and tried to pull up, but could not withstand the thrust of the boy behind him; and Frioulat came charging along with such speed that he jostled those who were struggling to keep their balance and they all went in together. The trench was about six feet deep, the earth frozen hard as stone.

Germaine had lit the stove, but to save fuel she was keeping the fire low while she awaited Antoine's return. Although the room was tiny, its exposed position made it difficult to keep warm. The attic window was warped and let in a stream of cold air. When the wind blew from the north one could hear it whistling between the roof and the sloping ceiling, made of laths covered with a thin layer of plaster. Seated on one of the two truckle-beds which, with a kitchen table, a wooden chair, the iron stove and a few soap-boxes, comprised her entire furniture, Germaine waited, body and mind unmoving, staring at the small flame of the oil-lamp, which she had turned low.

By half-past six she had begun to grow worried. Antoine was never late when he knew that she was waiting for him, and she had told him at midday that she would be home by five. Several times she went out on to the landing, hoping that the sound of his footsteps would reduce by a minute the period of her anxious vigil. Finally she left the door half-open. But when at length she heard her name called, it came to her through the window. The voice of the concierge rose from the bottom of the narrow courtyard, echoing as though in a well: 'Hey, Buge!'

She was accustomed to summon her in this fashion when ladies came to call upon Germaine's services as a charwoman without wanting to be put to the trouble of climbing seven flights of stairs.

Downstairs a policeman was talking to the concierge in her *loge*. Directly she set eyes upon him Germaine guessed that he had come about Antoine, and her flesh shrank with terror. There was a moment of sympathetic silence as she entered.

'You're the mother of Antoine Buge?' said the policeman. 'Your son has had an accident. I don't think it's very bad. He and some other children fell into a trench in the road, dug for drainage repairs. I don't know how deep it was, but the ground's very hard in this weather. They hurt themselves. They have been taken to the Bretonneau Hospital. You might be able to see him if you go there this evening.'

Out in the street Germaine took off her apron, rolled it and put it under her arm, after having removed the purse and handkerchief from one of its pockets. Her first instinct was to take a taxi, but then she reflected that the money could be better spent on Antoine. So she went on foot, conscious neither of the cold nor of her weariness. Her distress was accompanied by no impulse of revolt, and indeed, thinking of Antoine and their life together in the attic, reckoning up those years of happiness, it seemed to her that she had been guilty of evading her true destiny. The time had come to settle the account, and this disaster restored the balance.

'It had to happen,' she thought. 'I was too happy.'

At the hospital they showed her into a waiting-room where four women and three men were already seated, talking excitedly together. She gathered from the first words she overheard that they were parents of the other boys. In any case, she knew Mme Frioulat, a little, dark, hard-faced woman who kept a provision shop in the Rue Ramey where she was sometimes a customer. She was tempted for an instant to join the group in

order to learn more about the accident, but no one paid any attention to her except Mme Frioulat, who had glanced rather forbiddingly at this new arrival, coatless and presumably husbandless, since she wore no wedding-ring.

Germaine sat down a short distance away and listened to the talk, which told her nothing. The others seemed to know no more than she did herself.

'I must say, I'd like to know how it happened,' said Naudin's father, a young man in the blue uniform of a métro ticket-collector.

'It was my husband who got the news,' said Mme Frioulat, raising her voice to intimate to Germaine that she was not alone in the world. 'He wanted to get the car out, but I said, "Don't bother, I'll take a taxi." One of us had to stay and mind the shop.'

Each in turn described how they had received the news of the accident. Germaine was not long in learning their names, all of which were familiar to her from having heard them spoken many times by Antoine. She gazed with deference and admiration at the Naudins, the Huchemins and the Rogiers, all of whom bore the names of schoolboys. This seemed to bring her into some sort of relationship with them, although she remained fully conscious of the gulf separating her from people who went in pairs, followed a calling, had family connections and lived in apartments of their own. In the meantime they continued to ignore her, but far from resenting this she was grateful to them for their tact. Only Mme Frioulat alarmed her a little, as from time to time she felt that hostile gaze fall upon her puny person. She obscurely perceived the reasons for this hostility, and if anxiety had not almost robbed her of the power to think she would have had little difficulty in understanding them. Long experience had taught her that ladies of a higher status, such as Mme Frioulat, do not greatly care to find themselves in a situation

where they are placed on the same footing as the poor and outcast. The grocer's wife from the Rue Ramey was suffering from a slight sense of social outrage. To be thus associated with a creature who was only too clearly an unmarried mother caused insidious doubts to arise in her mind. Although a shopkeeper's wife and the possessor of a car, could she continue to believe in the virtue of the social categories? Nevertheless she spoke to her.

'And you, Madame? Have you come here too because of this unfortunate accident?'

'Yes, Madame. I'm Buge's mother – Antoine Buge.'

'Ah, Antoine Buge. I see. I've heard of him. It seems he's a little demon, that boy. I daresay you've heard about him too, Madame Naudin?'

'Yes, I've heard Robert talk about him.'

'I thought as much. You've heard about him too. An absolute little demon.'

'No, truly, he isn't. Antoine's a very good boy,' protested Germaine, but Mme Frioulat would not let her go on.

'I daresay he isn't a bad boy at heart, but he's like so many others, he lacks discipline.'

'Children have to be kept in order,' said the ticket-collector.

Glad to be able to blame someone, and to find an explanation of the accident, the party of parents went on to exchange views on the upbringing of children, confining themselves to generalities but clearly directing their remarks at Germaine Buge. The anxiety from which all were suffering caused their hearts to overflow with indulgence for a son invested by misfortune with the garb of innocence, and none doubted that Antoine had led his companions into disaster.

'I'm not blaming you,' said Mme Frioulat to Germaine. 'I wouldn't have the heart to blame anyone at a time like this.

Still, there's no getting away from the truth. There's no denying that if only you'd looked after your child better we shouldn't be here today. Now that the harm's done I've only got one thing to say, and that is that I hope it'll be a lesson to you.'

Called upon to endorse these sentiments, and gratified that she should have spoken in the name of them all, the other matrons greeted the speech with a murmur of approval. Germaine, who by reason of her calling had grown accustomed to lectures of this sort, accepted it without protest and, embarrassed by all the eyes regarding her, could only hang her head. A nurse came in.

'Cheer up,' she said. 'There's nothing serious. The doctor has just examined them. All he found was breaks and sprains and a few grazes. They'll all be perfectly all right in a few weeks. But they're suffering a little from shock at present, and so it's better not to disturb them. You'll be able to see them tomorrow at one o'clock.'

The five boys were together in a small, square ward, in company with three other injured youngsters of about their own age who were in their third week in hospital.

Antoine had been put between Frioulat and Huchemin, opposite Rogier and Naudin, whose beds were side by side. Their first night was a restless one, and the next day was equally uncomfortable. Still in pain and feverish, they scarcely spoke and took little interest in what went on in the ward. Excepting Antoine, they received their parents' visit with no great pleasure or excitement. But Antoine had been thinking of nothing else since the previous evening. He had been afraid on his mother's account, thinking of her wretchedly alone in their chilly garret that night and for so many nights to come; and when she entered the ward he was distressed by the signs of fatigue and

sleeplessness in her face. Knowing what was in his mind, the first words she spoke were to reassure him.

In the bed on Antoine's left Huchemin, talking between groans, answered his parents in a whimpering voice which discouraged questions. Frioulat, on his right, was decidedly terse with his mother, whose endearments seemed to him ridiculous. She called him 'darling boy' and 'precious angel' – a nice thing for the gang to hear! The nurse had asked that this first visit should not be too prolonged, and the parents stayed only a quarter of an hour. Their children in this unfamiliar setting, suddenly removed from their authority and endowed by the accident with rights of their own, had become strange to them and a little intimidating. Conversation was difficult. Germaine Buge, although she did not share this sense of unease as she sat at Antoine's bedside, nevertheless did not venture to stay behind, and left with the others.

Little Baranquin, the only one of the gang who had been undamaged by the tumble into the trench, arrived shortly after the parents had left, and his visit was more of a comfort to them. He was genuinely sorry to have been let off so lightly.

'You don't know how lucky you all are to have broken something. I wished I'd been here with you last night. I didn't half cop it when I got home. My dad was home already, and he gave me a hiding and then he went on about it all evening, about how I'd finish up in clink and all that. And he started again today at dinner, and I bet you I get some more this evening. Everything lasts a week with him.'

'Same here,' said Rogier. 'Coo, I should have copped a packet if I'd had the rotten luck to go home without anything the matter with me!'

Had it not been for their aches and pains, all would have congratulated themselves on being in hospital. Antoine, who did not remember ever having been scolded by his mother, was

the only one to derive no consolation from this aspect of the matter. Even Frioulat, who was held to be spoilt by his parents, considered that he would have run fearful risks if he had gone home, like Baranquin, with his skin intact and his overcoat torn from top to bottom.

The ensuing days were livelier. The sprains and dislocations were a good deal less painful, and the limbs in plaster could be almost forgotten. Their enforced immobility limited their amusements to reading and chattering. They talked a great deal about the expedition, all passionately anxious to recall every detail. There were vigorous disputes which the voice of the nurses could not always subdue.

Pointing the moral of the episode, Frioulat extolled the principles of order and authority and maintained that nothing would have happened if the gang had remained faithful to its leader.

'All the same, that didn't stop you getting the wind up,' one of the others objected.

'I was the last to bolt,' said Frioulat. 'And what else could I do when you'd left me there alone, blooming lot of funks.'

The fact that no one could move, and therefore no one risked a punch on the nose, made the discussion even more forthright.

But quarrels were forgotten when they talked about the seven-league boots. It was to be greatly feared that the shopkeeper would have found a purchaser by the time they left hospital, and for this reason Baranquin's visits were impatiently awaited. All were terrified lest he should bring bad news. Knowing this, he always hastened to reassure them the moment he entered. The boots were still in the window, and every day, he said, they grew shinier and more splendid, and the white fur lining more silky. In the late afternoon, when dusk was falling and before the lights were turned on, it was not hard to persuade oneself that the boots retained all their original virtue,

and they ended by believing this almost without giving it a thought. Nothing was more enthralling and more restful than to lie in one's bed dreaming of those stupendous, seven-league strides. Each of them told tales aloud of what he would do if the boots were his. Frioulat's favourite notion was that he would beat all the world's running records. Rogier was as a rule more modest. He said that when he was sent out to buy a half-pound of butter or a quart of milk he'd go to a village in Normandy where he could get them cheapest, and pocket the change. But all were agreed that they would spend their Thursday afternoons visiting Africa and India, fighting the natives and hunting big game. The thought of such excursions allured Antoine no less than it did his companions. But other dreams, which he kept secret, were even dearer to him. His mother would never again have to worry about getting enough food. On days when money was short he'd pull on the boots, and in ten minutes he'd have been all round France. He'd pinch a joint of meat from a shop in Lyons, a loaf in Marseilles, vegetables in Bordeaux, milk in Nantes and coffee in Cherbourg. He went so far as to consider finding a good coat for his mother, to keep her warm; and perhaps a new pair of shoes, because she only had one and they were badly worn. And then there was quarter-day, and if they hadn't got the hundred and sixty francs rent he would have to do something about that too. Nothing could be easier. You go into a shop in Lille or Carcassonne, a rich sort of shop where the customers don't come in clutching their money and wondering how to make it go round; and when a lady's getting her change at the cash-desk you just whip it out of her hand, and before she can say a word you're back in Montmartre. It isn't at all a nice thing to go taking other people's property, or even to lie in bed thinking about it. But it isn't nice to be hungry either. And when you haven't enough money to pay the rent of your garret, and you have to admit it to the concierge and make

promises to the landlord, you feel just as ashamed as if you'd stolen something.

Germaine Buge brought her son as many oranges and sweets and picture-papers as the other parents brought their children: nevertheless, Antoine had never been so conscious of his poverty as he was in hospital, and this was because of the visits. To judge by the talk that went on between the other boys and their parents, life was an affair of overflowing and almost unbelievable richness. These conversations evoked pictures of a complicated existence abounding in brothers, sisters, cats, dogs and canaries, and extending to the neighbours over the way, to the uttermost ends of the *quartier*, to the uttermost ends of Paris itself, to the suburbs, to the provinces and even abroad. There was mention of Uncle Émile, of Aunt Valentine, of cousins at Argenteuil, of letters arrived from Clermont-Ferrand or from Belgium. For example, Huchemin, who at school didn't amount to anything at all, had a cousin who was an air pilot and an uncle who worked in the arsenal at Toulon. Now and then a relation called who lived at the Porte d'Italie or at Epinal; and one day a family of five came from Clichy to sit round Naudin's bed, and what's more there were more of them at home.

Germaine was the only one who came to sit at Antoine's bedside, and she had no tales to tell of anyone. There were no uncles or cousins or friends in their life. Oppressed by the sense of their impoverishment, and by the presence and volubility of the others, they never again recovered the ease and unconstraint of the first day. Germaine talked a little of her visits to different households, but only briefly, fearing lest she should be overheard by Frioulat or his mother, for she suspected that it might be distasteful to a son of shopkeepers to be lying in the next bed to the son of a domestic help. Antoine worried about her meals and begged her not to spend too much on sweets and

comics, also fearing lest he should be overheard. They talked almost in a whisper, and most of the time remained silent, gazing at one another, or with their attention distracted by the loud-voiced conversations going on around them.

One afternoon when the visiting period was over, Frioulat, generally so talkative, stayed quiet for a long time, gazing abstractedly at nothing as though in a state of enchantment. When Antoine asked him what had happened he at first only replied:

'Something marvellous!'

He was visibly exultant, yet his rapture seemed to contain an element of remorse which held him back on the verge of confidences. At length he could keep silent no longer.

'I told my mother about them. She's going to buy them for me. I shall have them when I get home.'

A chill pierced Antoine to the heart. The boots in that instant ceased to be a treasure belonging to them all, upon which each could draw without robbing his neighbour.

'I'll lend them to you,' said Frioulat.

Antoine shook his head. He could not forgive Frioulat for having told his mother of something which should have remained a secret among them.

Upon leaving the hospital, Mme Frioulat took a taxi to the Rue Élysée-des-Beaux-Arts, where she had no difficulty in finding the shop her son had described to her. The boots were still in the window. She stood for a few minutes gazing at the other objects and their labels. Her knowledge of history was slight in the extreme, and the Campo-Formio fountain-pen caused her no astonishment. She did not think highly of this kind of trade, but the window nevertheless impressed her favourably on the whole. One notice in particular inspired her with confidence, the one which read:

'Only the rich are allowed credit.'

Although the warning seemed to her tactless, the shopkeeper's principles were evidently sound. She pushed open the door and saw, by the light of the hanging bulb, a little, skinny old man seated facing a big, stuffed bird with which he seemed to be playing a game of chess. Without paying any heed to Mme Frioulat's entrance he went on moving the pieces on the board, playing in turn for himself and his opponent. Every now and then he uttered a truculent and satisfied chuckle, no doubt after he had made a move on his own account. Recovering from her first astonishment, Mme Frioulat was about to draw attention to herself when the old man, half-rising from his chair, his eyes gleaming and his finger pointed threateningly at the bird, burst into a torrent of piping abuse:

'You cheated! Don't lie to me! You cheated again. You deliberately shifted your knight to cover your queen when she was attacked by two of my pieces and was just about to be taken. Aha, you admit it, do you? Well, don't worry, my dear sir. You know what we agreed. I hereby confiscate your knight.'

He removed a piece from the board and put it in his pocket, after which, gazing at the bird, he uttered a chuckle that turned into a positive convulsion of laughter. He had fallen back on his chair, and leaning over the board with his hands crossed on his chest and his shoulders shaking, he laughed almost silently, only occasionally allowing a small, shrill sound to escape him, like the squeak of a mouse. Mme Frioulat, somewhat alarmed, was now wondering whether she would not do better to withdraw. The old man finally recovered his gravity, and wiping his eyes said to his strange companion:

'I'm sorry, but you look so extremely funny with that expression on your face. Please don't go on glaring at me, or I shall start laughing again. You may not realise it, but you're

really quite ludicrous. However, I'm prepared to overlook what happened. I'll give you back your knight.'

He got the knight out of his pocket, and after restoring it to its place resumed his study of the board.

Mme Frioulat was still half inclined to leave. But reflecting that her visit had cost her the price of a taxi she decided to stay, and coughed several times on a rising note. At the third cough the curio-dealer turned to look at her with an expression containing more than a hint of disapproval.

'You play chess, of course?' he said.

'No,' said Mme Frioulat, disconcerted by the question. 'I don't know how. But I used to play draughts. My grandfather was very good.'

'In short, you don't play chess.'

For some moments the old man gazed at her with an air of astonishment and perplexity, as though he found her a phenomenon hard to account for and was wondering how she got there. Appearing to conclude that the problem was insoluble and in any case lacking in interest, he shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the board saying courteously to the bird:

'It's your move, my dear sir.'

Mme Frioulat was so taken aback by her reception, and by the indifference of this singular tradesman, that for the moment she was speechless.

'Aha!' said the old man, rubbing his hands. 'The game's getting interesting. I'm most curious to see how you will get out of your very difficult position.'

'Excuse me,' Mme Frioulat ventured. 'I'm a customer.'

This time the curio-dealer turned to gaze at her in stupefaction.

'A customer!'

After which he sat dreamily considering the chessboard, until suddenly his face cleared:

'I hadn't noticed that you'd played your rook. That makes it more interesting than ever. A masterly reply, and one which I was far from anticipating. My compliments, my dear sir. The situation is now completely reversed. I am the one who is in danger.'

Seeing him again absorbed in the game, Mme Frioulat decided to take offence and said in a louder voice:

'I can't afford to stand here all the afternoon waiting till it suits you to serve me. I've other things to do.'

'Well, but what do you want, Madame?'

'I came to ask the price of the pair of boots in the window.'

'Three thousand francs,' said the curio-dealer without looking up from the board.

'Three thousand! You must be mad!'

'Exactly, Madam.'

'Three thousand for a pair of boots! But it isn't possible. You can't be serious.'

This time the old man rose in annoyance, and planting himself in front of her, demanded:

'Madame, are you prepared to pay three thousand francs for that pair of boots or are you not?'

'Certainly not!' cried Mme Frioulat vehemently. 'Most decidedly not!'

'Then we need not discuss the matter any further. Will you kindly allow me to go on with the game?'

Frioulat's companions, when they learned that he was to become the possessor of the seven-league boots, were so indignant that he felt it necessary to placate them.

He explained that he had not really intended to tell his mother about the boots, and that it had just slipped out. And anyway she hadn't promised anything. She just hadn't said no. Remembering the look of triumph which he had not been wise

enough to conceal, the others were by no means reassured. For a whole day he was practically sent to Coventry. They spoke to him only in monosyllables. But in the end the need to hope was stronger than misgiving. Although they were still uneasy, they managed to persuade themselves that the danger was only slight. By degrees they talked less readily about the boots, and in the end the subject was dropped, at least as a matter of conversation.

But inspired by Frioulat's example, each began to have hopes of his own and to make plans. One afternoon, after his mother's departure, Huchemin displayed a glowing countenance, and all that evening remained locked in triumphant silence. The next day it was the turn of Rogier and Naudin to rejoice.

Frioulat was the first to leave the hospital, and when the others made him promise to come and see them he said:

'It isn't going to be much trouble to *me* to come this little bit of a way!'

During the journey home, on which he was accompanied by his father, he asked no questions, not wanting to deprive his parents of the pleasure of giving him a surprise. No mention was made of the boots when they arrived, but this did not trouble him. His parents were busy in the shop all morning. No doubt they were saving it up till lunch-time. Meanwhile he went out into the small yard at the back and made himself a fighter-plane, for which purpose there were ample materials at his disposal – packing-cases, barrels, bottles and tins stacked in the yard. Having rigged up an instrument board of salmon and fruit tins in an empty packing case, and made a machine-gun out of a bottle of brandy, he was flying at two-fifty miles an hour in a clear sky when suddenly he spotted a hostile plane. Without losing his head for a second he increased speed to four hundred. The enemy didn't see him and went on flying all

unawares. Frioulat swooped down with his machine-gun in action, but as he leaned over the edge of the packing-case the bottle of brandy slipped from his hands and smashed on the stones of the yard. In no way disconcerted, he muttered between clenched teeth:

'The swine! He's knocked out my machine-gun!'

Mme Frioulat, who was in the room at the back of the shop, heard the crash and looked out to see the fragments of the bottle lying in a pool of brandy.

'Well, if it isn't the limit!' she exclaimed. 'The instant you come home you start getting up to mischief. It's a great pity you didn't stay where you were. A bottle of best quality cognac that's just gone up ten per cent! I was thinking of going to buy those boots for you this afternoon, but now you'll have to do without them. You certainly shan't have them now. Anyway, it was perfectly silly, all that fuss about another pair of boots. You've already got a pair that's practically new.'

Rogier left hospital two days later. When, upon arriving home, he brought himself to mention the boots, the whole family gazed at him in surprise. His mother, recalling the promise she had made him, murmured, 'Oh, yes – boots', and noting her slight embarrassment, his father said:

'I'm sure it would be very nice for you to have a new pair of boots, but we'll talk about that when your school-work has improved. You needn't think you can ask for anything you like just because you broke your leg. I'm not saying your mother didn't promise you a pair when you were in bed, but you're better now. You're perfectly well again. And now what you've got to think about is making up for lost time. At the end of the year, if you have done your work well, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you've done it well, and then we can come back to this matter of boots and – er – think it over. But there's no hurry, is there? Work is the great thing.'

Naudin, who went home the following day, encountered a similar disappointment, although in his case it was less wrapped up. When he raised the subject his mother, who had repeated her promise only the day before, said vaguely, 'You'd better ask your father', and his father said 'Boots!' in a tone of as much indifference as if his wife had sought to arouse his interest in the causes of the Thirty Years War.

Antoine and Huchemin, whose beds were next to one another, stayed a further week in hospital after the departure of Naudin. Their isolation, surrounded by newcomers, led to an intimacy which was often painful for Antoine.

During that week he had to suffer a great deal more on account of his poverty. Finding little or no matter for confidences in his own life, he was obliged to listen to those of Huchemin without being able to respond to them except with comments. Nothing is more depressing than the rôle of the humble confidant. Everyone knows, for instance, that in the classic drama it is the confidants who furnish the real tragedy. It is heartrending to observe these noble souls, to whom nothing ever happens, as with a courteous resignation they listen to the sagas of club bores revelling in their own vicissitudes of fortune. Huchemin, discovering the delight of having someone to bore, overflowed with friendliness and anecdotes about members of his family. What prompted him especially to talk about his uncles and aunts was the hope he placed in them. Having learned by the experience of Frioulat, Rogier and Naudin that the promises of fathers and mothers were not to be relied on, he chose to believe that there was a greater virtue in aunts and uncles. He talked, indeed, as though his own were positively fighting for the privilege of presenting him with a pair of seven-league boots. Antoine was overwhelmed with tales of Uncle Jules, Uncle Marcel, Uncle André and Uncle Lucien, and of Aunts Anna, Roberte and Léontine. At night,

when the others were asleep, he found himself musing more often than he ordinarily did, and at great length, on the strangeness of his own lot, which was that of having not a single aunt, uncle or cousin in the world. Except in the case of orphans, which are, however, not very rare, he could not conceive of a smaller family than his own. It was saddening and discouraging. A day came when he grew sick of being poor and a mere confidant. When Huchemin began to talk about a certain Aunt Justine he cut him short, saying calmly:

'Your Aunt Justine's just like all the rest of your family, and I'm not very interested in her. If you want to know, I've got enough to do thinking about my uncle who's due home any day now from America.'

Huchemin opened his eyes wide and exclaimed:

'From America?'

'Yes. My Uncle Victor.'

Antoine was a little pink. He was not in the habit of lying. His life was so simple that he had never felt the need for it. Being now assailed with questions he had to sustain and expand his lie, and it was with no displeasure that he built up the character of Uncle Victor. The thing became more than a game; it became an act of revenge upon life, and then life itself, suddenly abounding and overflowing. Uncle Victor became a towering figure, handsome, brave, generous and strong, who had passed all his examinations, who killed a person every week and played marvellously on the mouth-organ. Just the sort of man, in short, to undertake the most heroic exertions, and fly in the face of the most numerous of families, in order to procure for his nephew a pair of boots he wanted. And he wouldn't worry about the price either. Having languished so long in the rôle of confidant, Antoine now let himself go with an enthusiasm and assurance that pierced Huchemin to the heart, leaving him with only the faintest ray of hope.

On the following day Antoine awoke with a guilty conscience, wishing he had not let imagination run away with him. Uncle Victor became an embarrassment, overblown and somewhat alarming because of the importance he had come to assume. Antoine tried to forget and ignore him, but so powerful and original was his uncle's personality that he could not be thus set aside. So Antoine had to get used to him, and during the days that followed he grew so accustomed to this new companion that he could not have done without him. Conscience no longer pricked him, except in visiting hours, when his mother was there. He would have liked to introduce her to Uncle Victor so that she, too, might be enriched by this magnificent relationship, but he did not know how to go about it. He could not ask her to support him in a lie. He thought of the old childish formula, 'Let's pretend we have an uncle in America and his name's Uncle Victor.' But his mother's childhood had no doubt been harder than his own, and her mind was closed to all notions of play. For her part, Germaine Buge suspected that he was keeping a secret from her, and both suffered from their inability to disclose what was in their minds.

Antoine began to view the time for leaving hospital with feelings of acute apprehension. The other boys would say, 'Well, your uncle must be back from America by now, but the boots are still in the window.' It would be dangerous to reply that Uncle Victor's return had been delayed. A hero who is not on the spot when he is needed is simply a lie or an illusion. The other boys would say, 'Nuts' and 'Turn it up' and 'Did you get your uncle out of a book or at the pictures?'

Antoine and Huchemin left hospital the same day, on a morning of icy rain which made them sigh for the warmth of the wards. They did not leave together. Antoine had to wait for his mother, who had gone to clean the house of Lefort, the butcher. He almost hoped she would not come, so formidable

did the personality of Uncle Victor now appear. Germaine arrived late because she had had to wait an hour at the butcher's shop in order not to offend M. Lefort, who insisted on driving her the five hundred yards in his car.

It was the first time Antoine had been out since the accident, and he walked uncertainly, his legs still weak. Despite the wind and the rain he would not let his mother spend money on a taxi, and so they went on foot. They walked slowly, but it was a steep climb up the hill of Montmartre, under a clay-coloured sky, and Antoine grew tired and discouraged. He had not the strength even to answer his mother when she spoke to him, and at the thought of the seven flights of stairs which had to be climbed he wept silently under the hood of his cape. But even more distressing than the stairs was the pause at the concierge's *loge*. She questioned him with the affable condescension which poor people often show to those even poorer than themselves, and she saw fit to talk very loudly, in the voice she was accustomed to use with weak-witted or especially insignificant persons. Antoine was obliged to show her his leg and the place where the break had occurred, and to give her full details of his treatment. Germaine would have liked to shorten the ordeal, but she feared to offend a person having so much influence. Finally he had to thank the concierge, who gratified herself by giving him ten *sous*.

When he entered their garret he had a shock, for the wallpaper was changed. His mother was watching him anxiously, uncertain how the surprise would affect him. He smiled in an effort to conceal his dismay. As he now realised, he had liked the old wallpaper, scratched and torn and darkened though it was, its pattern almost effaced with usage and grime. His eyes had been accustomed to seek out landscapes of his own imagining on those sombre walls, and the figures of beasts and men which came to life as twilight fell. The new paper, of a

pale green which seemed already faded, was scattered with little buds of a darker green. Thin and badly pasted on by some casual odd-job man, it had a shoddy look. Germaine had lit the fire and the wind was making the stove smoke, so that the window had to be opened, which involved the use of stratagems against the flood of air and rain that came pouring into the room. Seated on his bed, Antoine looked at life with that early-morning clarity that comes sometimes to children when they are recovering from an illness. After laying the table, his mother said to him as she served the soup:

'Do you like it?'

Smiling, she looked round at the gimcrack walls.

'It's very nice,' said Antoine. 'I like it very much.'

'I had a job making up my mind. There was another one I liked, pink and white, but it would have shown the dirt more. I'd have liked to bring along samples for you to see, but I didn't want to spoil the surprise. But you do like it, don't you?'

'Yes,' Antoine repeated, 'I like it.'

And he began to cry soundlessly, in a steady flow of tears that seemed as though it would never stop. 'Don't you feel well?' his mother asked. 'Are you unhappy? Are you missing your friends?' He shook his head. Remembering that she had seen him cry like this before because of their poverty, Germaine hastened to assure him that they had never been better off. She had just paid the rent, and so for three months they had no need to worry on this score. And last week she had found a new job, an hour and a half's cleaning very early every morning, and the people were pleased with her work.

'But there's something else I haven't told you, it only happened yesterday. Mlle Larrisson's dog's dead. Poor Flic, he wasn't a bad dog, but seeing that he's dead there's no reason why we shouldn't be the ones to gain by it. From now on I'm to

have all Mlle Larrisson's left-overs. She offered them very nicely.'

Antoine would have liked to show a suitable gratitude for these signs of fortune's favour, but he remained plunged in wretchedness. His state of distress so troubled his mother that she was reluctant to leave him alone even for a part of the afternoon. At half-past one, however, seeing that he was calmer, she decided to go and do her two hours' cleaning for Mlle Larrisson, who was inclined to be critical of the way she worked.

The cause of Antoine's grief continued to perplex her, and later it occurred to her to go to meet the children as they came out of school in order to question his friends. The one she knew best, from having met him at Antoine's bedside or outside the hospital, was little Baranquin. Her talk with him was successful beyond her hopes. Baranquin had no doubt at all as to the reason for Antoine's unhappiness. Within a few minutes she had learned the story of the seven-league boots and Uncle Victor from America.

After losing her way several times, Germaine at length found the curio-shop in the Rue Élysée-des-Beaux-Arts. The window was lighted, but she could not open the door. She was wrestling with the handle when the curio-dealer, drawing aside the rug which covered the glass pane, signed to her to go away. Germaine did not understand and pointed to the boots in the window. Finally the old man half-opened the door and said:

'Can't you see the shop's shut?'

'Shut?' exclaimed Germaine in astonishment. 'But it's not six yet.'

'It hasn't been open all day. Today is my birthday. You can see for yourself.'

He opened the door wider to disclose himself entirely, and Germaine saw that he was wearing a morning-coat and white

tie. She sought to explain the reason for her visit and to tell him about Antoine, who was waiting for her at home, but he would pay no attention.

'Madame, I am profoundly distressed, but I must repeat that today is my birthday. I am entertaining a friend who has come to visit me.'

He glanced over his shoulder and added, lowering his voice:

'He's uneasy. He'd like to know who I'm talking to. Come in and behave as though you had called to wish me a happy birthday. He'll be furious because he's horribly jealous and everything I do annoys him, but it will serve him right.'

Seizing the opportunity, Germaine followed the old man into the shop. There was no one there but the big bird about which Baranquin had told her, and which appeared to her the more remarkable inasmuch as it was adorned with a white tie knotted at the middle of its long neck, and a monocle hanging by a black ribbon from one of its wings.

The curio merchant winked at Germaine and said in the loudest voice he could muster:

'How kind of you, Princess, to have remembered your old friend, and what a delightful surprise for me!'

He glanced sidelong at the bird to note the effect of these words, and smiled in malice. Germaine in her bewilderment scarcely knew what to say, but the old man's fluency was such that he carried on both sides of the conversation, thus making things easy for her. After a few moments he turned to the bird and announced in a voice of triumph:

'The Princess tells me I am entirely right. The Maréchale d'Ancre was at the bottom of the whole business.'

Forgetting the Princess, and, indeed, turning his back on her, he plunged into a long historical dispute in which he did not appear to gain the upper hand, since in the end he fell silent,

gazing resentfully at the heron. Germaine, who had found this rather tedious, took advantage of the silence to remind him that she had come to his shop to buy the boots in the window.

'It's a strange thing,' said the old man. 'A number of people have been after them recently.'

'What do they cost?'

'Three thousand francs.'

He had answered as though without thinking, and he seemed to take no notice of her consternation. Suddenly he started and, glaring at the bird, cried out indignantly:

'Of course, you don't agree either! You don't think the boots are worth three thousand. Go on, say it – don't mind me! Since you're wearing a monocle today, you can do as you please.'

After a brief silence he turned back to Germaine and said, smiling bitterly:

'You heard? It appears that the boots are worth no more than twenty-five francs. Very well, then, you shall have them for twenty-five francs. Apparently I no longer count for anything in this place. It seems that this gentleman is the master. Well, take them, Madame.'

He got the boots out of the window, wrapped them in newspaper and handed them to Germaine:

'Wretch,' he said to the bird, 'you've made me lose two thousand nine hundred and seventy-five francs!'

Germaine, who was engaged in opening her purse, was disturbed by this thought.

'I wouldn't want to take advantage . . .' she said.

'Don't worry,' said the old man, 'I shall deal with him. He's filled with envy and malice. I shall despatch him with a sword-thrust!'

Germaine saw, as he took the twenty-five francs, that his hand was quivering with rage. Directly he had the coins he turned and flung them at the bird's head, breaking the monocle,

of which only a fragment remained hanging at the end of the black ribbon. Then, without an instant's pause, he snatched an old sabre out of the window and unsheathed it. Germaine Buge fled with the boots, without waiting to see what he did next. She wondered for a moment, when she got outside, whether she should call the police or at least summon a neighbour. It seemed to her that the bird was really in danger. But on second thoughts she decided that to do anything of the kind would serve no purpose and might get her into trouble.

At the sight of the boots Antoine turned pink with happiness and the dismal new wallpaper seemed to him to glow with the bright green of spring-time. That night when his mother was asleep he got up noiselessly, dressed and pulled on the seven-league boots. Feeling his way across the garret in the pitch darkness, he opened the window with infinite precautions and climbed out on to the window-ledge. His first stride took him to Rosny-sous-Bois, in the suburbs, and with his second he reached the *département* of Seine-et-Marne. In ten minutes he was at the other end of the earth, where he stopped in a great meadow to gather an armful of the first rays of sunshine, tying them with gossamer.

He found his way back easily to the garret and slipped in without a sound. On his mother's narrow bed he laid his glittering burden so that its glow lighted her sleeping face, and he thought that she looked less tired.

Josse

ALTHOUGH he had been there three times in the past five years, Josse would not have been able to distinguish his sister's house from the others in that small-town street. He had even forgotten the remarkable frieze of apple-green glazed tiles that ran across the front, marking the division between the ground and the first floors. As he got out of the taxi and stood at the iron grill across the porch of the prim, silent little dwelling, he had an unfamiliar sensation akin to loneliness. The taxi-driver, with a surly expression, was getting out the three metal kit-boxes, inscribed in white capital letters with his name and warrant-officer's rank, which contained all Josse's worldly goods. At his first glimpse of the small, dried-up man at the railway-station, white-haired, with a beret on his head and a yellow ribbon in his button-hole, the driver had recognised the professional soldier, and the sight had aroused all his anti-militarist sentiments. The kit-boxes had confirmed him in his dislike.

Josse tried to open the iron outer-gate and found that it was locked. He turned to the driver, who was setting down the last of the kit-boxes on the pavement of the Avenue Aristide-Briand, and said curtly, with a slight beetling of his brows as though he held him personally responsible:

'No one in. What does that mean?'

'No idea,' said the driver tersely.

The clock showed seven francs, with another three due for the baggage. Josse paid, adding a fifty-centime tip. The driver, his expression hostile and disdainful, took the money without saying anything, got back into his cab and drove off after spitting in the direction of the gate. Josse looked at his wrist-watch. The time was nearly five. A low, coppery sky and a damp wind told of the approach of winter. The avenue, almost deserted, was bordered by dreary, prim little houses, except at the end leading into the town, where blocks of flats faced each other; while the other end, leading out into the countryside, passed through a fringe of ramshackle dwellings occupied by poorer families. Standing there with his baggage Josse could hear nothing except the whistle of the wind in the trees, and, in the rare moments when it paused, the screech of a saw-mill in a street near the railway-line. The exigencies of his calling had moved him about France, Germany, North Africa and the Near East without his being affected by any landscape: but now, conscious of the melancholy of this provincial suburb where he had allowed himself to be persuaded to spend the rest of his life, he sensed in it an obscure threat. And as he became aware of his novel susceptibility to this sort of impression he had a feeling of uneasiness, for he seemed to discern in it the pernicious and corrupting influence of civilian life already at work upon his sturdy, solidly constituted being – the man, *par excellence*, which as a professional soldier he believed himself to be. Turning back to the house he noticed a bell-push in one of the stone pillars flanking the grill, and tentatively pressed it. Almost instantly he heard the slamming of a door followed a few moments later by the sound of footsteps on the concrete path at the side of the house. His sister Valérie appeared, wearing her customary black dress, a tall, stringy woman, her severe face little softened by the white scarf she wore over her head.

'Why have you arrived so early? You weren't due till tomorrow.'

'I've been waiting here for a quarter of an hour. Why on earth do you lock yourself in?'

'Because I choose to. You might at least have let me know you were coming sooner than you said.'

'If you're going to open this gate for God's sake open it. My stuff's here on the pavement.'

Valérie opened the gate, stared at the kit-boxes and said: 'Is that all you've got?'

Josse carried his boxes up the small flight of steps to the front door while his sister went to open it from inside. The day was dying and it was already dark in the house. Not finding a switch Josse asked Valérie to switch on the light, but she said it was too early and they could still see well enough. Although he was far from wasteful of his money, Josse, in the course of thirty-six years of army life, had never acquired the sense of petty domestic economies.

'I don't want to break my neck lugging this stuff upstairs. For Christ's sake switch on the blasted light.'

'All right, all right,' said Valérie, doing so. 'But there's no need to go annoying the neighbours with foul language. You aren't in barracks any more and you might as well remember it.'

Up in his bedroom Josse set about unpacking his boxes. The first two contained underwear, a civilian suit and three uniforms which he laid out carefully on the bed, handling them with a gentleness that was almost a caress. Valérie, assisting him, was more concerned with her brother himself than with his unpacking. Leaning against the door, midway between the bed and the mirrored wardrobe in which he was arranging his things, she watched his movements with attentive eyes. The third box was largely filled with souvenirs bought for the most

part in the bazaars of Syria and North Africa – ink-stands, ash-trays, cheap leatherwork, inlaid wooden boxes, brass vases, slippers with silver embroidery, daggers, pistols, coloured prints. Josse sent her downstairs for a hammer and nails with which to fix a number of photographs to the wall – one of himself in uniform, a coloured one of Marshal Foch, and groups of warrant and non-commissioned officers in which he figured. Finally, removing a glazed plaster figure of Christ from above the bed, he hung in its place a glass case in which his *médaille militaire* and his two *croix de guerre*, for the 1914 war and the colonial wars, reposed on black velvet.

'You aren't putting up a photograph of me,' Valérie remarked.

'Why should I? I shall be seeing you every day. Anyway, I've lost them.'

'Well, you'd better get them back. I sent you three photographs, one in 1914, one in 1927 and the third last year. I won't have them being handed round in the mess.'

Josse glanced at her and then looked swiftly away, shrugging his shoulders. Valérie flushed, seeing in that hastily averted gaze all the looks of men that had been turned away from her in the long course of her old maid's life, the invariable rebuff of illusions that had never died. While Josse busied himself with his odds and ends she looked at his bony face in the mirror on one of the wardrobe doors. Age and white hair had rendered it in some sort neutral, somewhat softening the aggressive quality which its ugliness had always possessed, but it still retained a stubborn masculinity.

They had a sharp difference of opinion when the time came for their evening meal. Valérie had laid the table in the kitchen as usual, but Josse wanted to have supper in the living-room. This was not due to bourgeois vanity but to a long-standing dislike, of which Valérie was perfectly aware, for the smell of

the kitchen, the sink and the garbage pail. She refused flatly to do as he asked and there was a furious and bitter altercation in which each of them enumerated their contributions to the common good. Valérie pointed out that the house was her property inherited with a little money from a great-aunt on whom she had danced attendance for thirty years; to which she added her functions as housekeeper, her talent as a musician, for she played the piano, and her social position and select circle of acquaintances. Josse, on his side, talked of his value as a man in a house where she did not like living alone, and the increased income he brought with him, which would enable her to live more comfortably. He went on to declare bluntly that he didn't give a damn for her musical talent or her acquaintances; and since she still would not give way he announced that he was going out to dine in a restaurant and that he would leave next day. Valérie finally consented to lay the table in the living-room.

Josse awoke next morning at a little before seven, rose at once and, from force of habit, washed and dressed with great rapidity, as though he had to be on the barrack-square in time for the bugle-call. Before going downstairs he glanced out at the street. Shop-assistants and school-children were hurrying along the pavements into the town. From the second of his two windows he could see over the wall into the garden of the house next door, but it offered no sign of life. He went downstairs, found no one about and could not open either of the house-doors. He was about to climb through a window when Valérie appeared in a wrapper.

'I'd like to know how one gets out of this place,' said Josse. 'I can't find a key anywhere.'

'You might at least say good morning.'

'Good morning. You'll have to give me a key.'

'You don't need a key.'

Josse was already in a bad humour, for with a new day starting he was beginning to miss the barracks and to feel uncomfortably at a loose end. His sister's flat statement, which was against all reason, caused him to turn pale with fury. However, she had sufficient perception to realise something of his state of mind and she gave him a key before he had a chance to blow up. While he sat drinking his coffee she pointed through the kitchen window at the small vegetable garden behind the house.

'You'll be able to spend part of your time working in it,' she said.

'No I won't,' said Josse.

'But you'll get bored otherwise. What do you intend to do all day?'

'Enjoy my retirement,' he answered gloomily.

As soon as he had finished breakfast Josse went out. Such was his air of haste, as though he had an urgent appointment, that Valérie could not refrain from asking where he was going, but all she got was a vague reply that increased her curiosity. Josse went along the Avenue Aristide-Briand into the town, and entered the main street without taking any interest whatever in its appearance or the traffic or the coming and going of housewives busy with their morning shopping. He walked rapidly, with a preoccupied air, as though he were indeed late for an appointment. After passing through the centre of the town he hesitated and then followed the Avenue Thiers, but more slowly, as though he were not certain of having taken the right road, and several times he nearly turned back. But suddenly, when he had almost lost hope, he found himself approaching the gateway of the barracks. It was a disused cavalry depot now occupied by the army's civil branch; but to the practised eye of the ex-soldier, the deserted parade-ground, bare and flat, afforded an absorbing prospect of slight rises and

hollows, and the livid blue of the tall windows of the living-quarters, and the dull green skylights over the stables, caused his heart to beat faster. In the ignominy of his civilian attire, and contemplating that world which, even in its abandonment, remained for him the concrete framework of the perfect life, he experienced the full awareness of his decline. He could not bring himself to stand and stare from the pavement, but walked straight on. After going a little further, however, he retraced his steps and entered a café opposite the barracks. The *patronne*, serving him with white wine, tried without encouragement to make conversation, complaining bitterly of the damage done to her trade by the departure of the regiment. For this she blamed the Socialist Council, which had done nothing to induce it to remain.

'Those people don't understand that a town without a regiment is like a widow without hope,' she said.

She was going on to describe the former glories of her establishment when Josse silenced her with a stony glare that caused her to take refuge behind her counter. Seated by the window he was now able to gaze at the barracks undisturbed. It was the open space in front that fascinated him, far more than the buildings surrounding it. Only a professional soldier can fully appreciate the beauty and infinite variety of a parade-ground. Its extent, its precise shape and contours, have an especial, subtle quality which is like a dimension of military discipline. After studying it for three-quarters of an hour Josse was still seeing new aspects in it, striking yet familiar, and each discovery had its counter-part or amplification in his own memories.

At about eleven o'clock two men, a sergeant and a civilian, emerged from the furthermost building and walked across the yard to the gateway. The civilian, who carried his umbrella as though it were a sabre, was evidently an ex-soldier. As he drew

nearer the cut of his suit, the way his tie was tied and the slight rakishness with which he wore his felt hat made this even more apparent, and Josse was relieved, for he had had a sense of profanation at the first sight of a mere civilian crossing a barrack-yard. Nevertheless when the two men entered the café it did not enter his head to try to strike up an acquaintance with them. Throughout his army life he had always been unapproachable, solitary and without friends. He had contrived, in every unit he had served with, to make himself hated by the men under him for his unsparing harshness and finicky insistence upon the least details of order and discipline. His comrades had avoided him as much as possible, and the commissioned officers had not troubled to hide their disdain for the over-officious warrant-officer whom they found both stupid and lacking in humanity. Josse, for his part, had liked no one.

When he got home that morning he found his sister in a state of extreme agitation which persisted despite her efforts to conceal it. Taking advantage of his absence she had explored his room and discovered a box of male contraceptives which, for decency's sake, he had hidden under a pile of underclothing. It was just what she had expected. The thought of her brother having relations of an unspeakable nature with a certain kind of woman had aroused in her a variety of emotions – fury, disgust, admiring terror and feverish curiosity. As he sat eating his midday meal, without paying much attention to her, she furtively regarded him, excited and exasperated by the tranquillity and cynical assurance of this male whose mind was doubtless filled with lubricious thoughts. His very calm was so infuriating that finally she demanded with a forcefulness that made him jump:

'Where did you go this morning?'

Looking startled and almost guilty Josse mumbled vaguely that he had gone for a stroll through the town. In his anxiety

not to say anything about his pilgrimage to the barracks he had all the air of a man concealing a shameful secret. Valérie rose from her chair, and leaning across the table said in a gasping voice:

'You went to visit a woman!'

'No,' said Josse, his calm restored by this misplaced suspicion, 'I didn't go anywhere near a woman.' And then, since she evidently did not believe him, he asked: 'In any case, what does it matter to you?'

'What does it matter to me? I'm known in this town. I don't want to be talked of as the sister of a man of disgraceful habits.'

Josse's reply filled her with consternation.

'Surely you don't imagine,' he said coolly, 'that I'm going to give up women?'

Josse fell into the habit of going to the café opposite the barracks three mornings a week. A certain shyness prevented him from going every day. Moreover, he mistrusted the soft, unmilitary emotions inspired in him by the sight of those buildings which no longer served their proper purpose and were, like himself, retired. On the days when he did not go there he nevertheless spent his mornings out of doors, partly because he had nothing else to do and partly for the pleasure of annoying his sister. Wandering about the town or the countryside, indifferent alike to people and to landscapes, he carried with him a burden of calm, disciplined boredom; and it was a pleasure to him, after these long peregrinations, lacking purpose or incident, to return home to encounter the hostile presence of Valérie, her vigilant acrimony and her inquisitorial gaze. Their basic incompatibility, and the constant clashes and explosions to which this gave rise, kept them both in a state of nervous tension which was at once painful and invigorating, and of which they both felt the need. Whenever he provoked Valérie, by some wounding retort

or a departure from the prescribed habits of their domestic life, when he felt her hard gaze upon him flashing with the first intimations of a storm, he had the same kind of satisfaction that he had known in the army at the sight of the men's furious resentment under his sarcasm and abuse. At the same time his sister's aggressive mistrust seemed to him to contain a secret element, sprung from the mystery of her mortified femininity, which caused him both alarm and disgust. This feeling was so strong in him that sometimes, at the very height of a quarrel, he would give way and allow her to triumph.

The afternoons were long, and their boredom would have been intolerable had it not been for his pleasure in irritating and mystifying Valérie. He locked himself in his room on the pretext of having important work to do, the nature of which he kept secret. In fact, he simply sat reading the newspaper or doing nothing at all. But when he realised one afternoon that she was listening at the door he got out of his armchair and tapped on the table at exactly regular intervals with the handle of his pocket-knife. After a quarter of an hour of this routine, which called for close concentration, he picked up his comb and ran its teeth up and down the edge of the mantelpiece, keeping as nearly as possible to the same rhythm. These regular, alternating sounds were utterly inexplicable to Valérie as she stood on the other side of the door, trembling with curiosity and spite. Thereafter Josse proceeded to enlarge his repertoire, producing a new sound every afternoon, and eventually a confusion of sounds – for instance, he would tap the table with one hand while with the other he rattled a little bag of celluloid balls, each containing a lead pellet, which he had bought at a toyshop in the town. He brought to these inventions all the ingenuity he had used in barracks for the purpose of tormenting his men, and Valérie, her nerves on edge and consumed with rage, was eventually impelled to launch a counter-attack. She too took to

shutting herself in her room during a part of the afternoon, on the pretext of having work to do; and when she found that her brother refused to listen at the door she racked her brains for sounds loud enough to be heard through the wall. It was some time before she hit on anything really satisfactory, but finally she had the idea of taking a knife-machine up with her, used for sharpening the domestic knives. So as not to wear out her knives she sharpened old bits of metal and worn-out saucepans, thereby producing an astonishing variety of noises. At first Josse was shaken by this, but he soon recovered. Confident of the superiority of his work over Valérie's cruder methods, he continued to devise delicate, mystifying sounds, and had the satisfaction, every now and then, of hearing the knife-grinder stop and the stealthy creak of the boards which told of her presence at his door.

In the evening Josse would leave his room, carefully locking it, and go off with an important-looking parcel containing nothing but newspapers, which he got rid of in a small copse just beyond the level crossing. The Avenue Aristide-Briand, at its further end near the railway-line, was flanked by the huts and shanties of the poor. Often when he went that way Josse encountered a pale, dark-haired, avid-eyed girl, the daughter of Spanish refugees, who smiled boldly at him and tried to get into conversation. He was more than once sorely tempted, but the thought that he would be tarnishing the dignity of his military past by having dealings with a pauper in rags restrained him. On the other hand he did not deny himself a weekly visit to the brothel in the Rue des Blancs-Boquins, where he went every Friday evening after supper. This he regarded as a matter of hygienic necessity, and moreover he found there a setting and an atmosphere inseparable from his memories of army life.

One Sunday morning in February, about four months after

his arrival, Josse was seated by the fire in the living-room reading the paper. Outside it was snowing so heavily as to obscure the houses across the street. At half-past eleven, as happened every Sunday, he heard Valérie open and close the iron gate of the porch on her return from Mass. A few minutes later she entered the room by way of the kitchen and said, planting herself in front of him:

'Look at me!'

He did so. She was standing rigidly, her chin upraised, her eyes flashing beneath her Sunday hat, adorned with a white bird.

'I know where you spend your Friday evenings, you filthy beast! Mme Jessicaud told me this morning after church, and by this time you can be certain the whole town knows!'

'Well, what of it?' said Josse. 'I'm not doing anyone any harm.'

Infuriated by his calm, and losing all self-control, she poured out a flood of abuse, calling him a pig, a lecherous brute, a dirty old man; spitting the words at him with an unsavoury delight. The string of insults, which he thought quite undeserved, finally exasperated Josse. Rising from his chair, but without otherwise growing heated, he answered her with the first verse of a soldiers' song which began, 'The first time I had a girl, just by the barracks gate . . .' He sang in a high nasal voice, but clipping the sentences, so that the refrain, rising like the crack of a whip, had the ring of a hymn of victory. Valérie shivered in her Sunday coat, laughed nervously, stumbled backwards and ran for refuge into the kitchen, whither he pursued her to polish her off with the second verse – 'Don't worry, sweetheart, it won't hurt! I shoved my right hand up her – ' 'No, no!' gasped Valérie. Huddled in a corner of the room, her face distraught, her hands clasped over her belly, she gazed beseechingly at him. Josse was silenced and disconcerted. After a moment he

went back into the living-room, troubled by the obscure consciousness of having stirred in her Heaven knew what murky depths.

On the following Friday evening he went to the Rue des Blancs-Boquins as usual, by way of sticking to his guns; but he did so almost reluctantly, and without being able to put that Sunday morning scene out of his mind. Valérie made no comment the next day, but merely signified her disapproval by not speaking to him. Thereafter his Friday evening excursions became less frequent. He could not visit the brothel without thinking uneasily of his sister, as though she were always at his elbow; her presence indeed seemed to accompany him into the very bedrooms of the establishment, on one occasion frustrating him at the crucial moment. By mid-April he had given up his visits altogether.

At about this time an incident took place in the café opposite the barracks, of little importance in itself, but which was none the less fraught with consequence for Josse. He was seated by the window as usual, gazing at the barrack-square, while some stonemasons from a nearby yard stood at the counter drinking and loudly joking with the *patronne*. The noise, which interfered with his contemplation, caused Josse to turn his head towards them with an authoritative glare calling for silence. Then it was that one of the group, a man of about thirty, left the others and came and stood in front of him. After studying him carefully, taking his time like a dealer examining a head of cattle, he gave a sudden laugh.

'Arent you Josse, the warrant-officer, the swine who made me sweat blood for a whole year at Epinal? So they've retired you at last!'

He had used the familiar 'tu', and Josse said sharply:

'I forbid you to address me in those terms!'

'You forbid me, do you? What with? With your big mouth?

There's no more shoving me in the glasshouse, my lad. If I choose to knock your block off, which is what you ruddy well deserve, it's just between the two of us, see? You can't get me transferred into the shit like you did my pals Ravelin and Minot, who are still in Oléron or southern Tunis, likely as not – if they're still alive. Remember Ravelin and Minot? Come on, you bastard, I want to hear you say it. Do you remember them?'

The other men had drawn near and, grasping the situation, were gazing at Josse with hostility. Josse had risen to his feet to confront them, wishing he had his service revolver with him. He would come back tomorrow to deal with this trouble-maker. But then the *patronne* intervened, urging the man to be civil to her customers. He seemed to be calming down, and the matter might well have ended there if at that moment two non-commissioned officers, coming across from the barracks, had not entered the café. They asked what was going on, and the stonemason, his wrath returning, nodded at Josse and with a flash of inspiration found the words most calculated to humiliate him in the presence of the two soldiers:

'My old warrant-officer,' he said. 'Now they've put him out to grass he comes here and sits staring at the barracks, just to keep in the swim, as you might say.'

Beneath the slightly embarrassed gaze of the two sergeants Josse flushed to the roots of his hair, feeling as though he had been stripped naked. He knew that after this he would never again set foot in the café, or even stroll in the neighbourhood of the barracks. The incident left him acutely depressed, faced for the first time by the realisation that his return to civil life, in depriving him of the privilege and protective wall of his army rank, had left him at the mercy of the world at large, his whole stature diminished. That hieratic universe, in which for thirty years he had been equal to every situation that arose, was

closed to him, and he seemed to have no means of dealing with the unfamiliar and chaotic world to which he was now consigned.

Deprived of his pilgrimages to the barracks, and of his weekly visit to the brothel, Josse had no longer any inclination to leave the house. His walks grew shorter and less frequent. Wherever he went, in the countryside or through the streets of the town, he seemed to be a stranger both to others and to himself, and there were times when in his hurry to get home he found himself almost breaking into a run. Only within those four walls could he rediscover and regain possession of himself, finding solace in an enclosed and rigidly ordered existence attended by an atmosphere of acrimony and security. It troubled him as the months passed to find himself so deeply rooted in his sister's dwelling, and conscious as he was of her desire to dominate and enslave him he had thoughts of leaving her. But these never went beyond words, and Valérie ceased to be impressed by his talk of going away. Watching her prey grow ripe for conquest she adroitly fostered his decline, ministering shrewdly to his comforts and on the other hand deliberately provoking the quarrels that lent a spice to their life together. She looked to the moment when, enmeshed in the web of daily habits and incapable of making a life for himself elsewhere, her brother might be finally subdued by the threat to turn him out – a threat to be delivered, not harshly, but in terms of sympathy and affection. She had the words all ready in her mind. 'My dear boy, I have a difficult nature which often prevents me from showing how fond of you I really am. We do nothing but torment one another. I cannot help wondering whether it would not be better, for both our sakes, if you were to go and live somewhere else.' What she really wanted was to have him working in the garden from morning till night.

Gradually Josse fell into the habit of rising late, not from

laziness but simply in order to delay the moment when he would have to go out. One May morning he threw back his shutters at about eight, and glancing over the wall into the next-door garden saw a small child who looked up at him and smiled. It was Yvon, the two-year-old son of their neighbours, whom Josse had seen on previous occasions without paying any attention to him. The father, a man of about thirty-five, was an insurance agent, but Valérie had not been on speaking terms with the family for some years, owing to her disapproval of their socialist politics. The little boy stood gazing at Josse with a friendly smile which so pleased him that he returned it. When he looked out of the window again, a minute or two later, he found Yvon still standing there, as though he had been waiting, and this time the child laughed and waved. Each of Josse's appearances at the window was greeted in the same way. The thing became a game which went on until he left the room. Over breakfast he had a violent argument with Valérie, on the subject of one of their grandfathers, long deceased, who she said had had a drooping moustache whereas Josse maintained that it had been pointed and turned up. Heated words flew between them, accusations of dishonesty, hypocrisy, jealousy, perfidy and every sin in the calendar; in consequence of which Josse thought no more about the little boy for the rest of the morning.

But when he went up to his room after lunch to make his usual noises, the first thing he did was to cross over to the window. Yvon was walking along a path with his back to him, going cautiously because of the roughness of the gravel. The sight of him, stumbling and swaying like a puppy, so charmed Josse that he forgot his fury with his sister. Seeing the child give a lurch he caught his breath and made an instinctive movement to catch him, but Yvon regained his balance and, turning and catching sight of Josse as he did so, threw up his arms in

delight at seeing him again. For a quarter of an hour they exchanged smiles and waves, after which the former warrant officer, rebuking himself for this waste of time, went to the locked drawer where he kept his bag of celluloid balls and other devices. Sitting down at the table he gave three rhythmic taps with his pocket-knife, rattled the balls for fifteen seconds by his watch and then again tapped three times. But that afternoon his mind was not on his work, and several times he left the table to stand gazing over the garden wall. He was doing so when Valérie, in her own room, started operations with the knife-grinder and bits of old iron. The sounds she produced were remarkable and various, not wholly without musical quality. Josse, observing the doings of the child in the sunlit garden, stayed where he was; and the thought passed through his mind that his afternoon pursuits were perhaps as fruitless as those of his sister.

A fortnight went by, and by the end of it Valérie was convinced that a profound change had taken place in her brother, not merely of behaviour but in his very nature. She had noted at the beginning an occasional unaccustomed lightness of manner, a lessening of his aggressiveness and a hint of something like indifference when one of those arguments arose which ordinarily ended in an explosion. These symptoms at first seemed too trivial to be important. Then suddenly it became clear to her that he was acquiring a kind of serenity, an inward happiness that was like the miraculous rediscovery of youth. He was not less stern of countenance, nor did he cease to bark every word he uttered as though it were an order; but he was altogether less quick to fly into a rage, and when she went out of her way to provoke him he dealt with her as it were absent-mindedly, or even with a seeming desire to placate her. From time to time, without apparent reason, she caught a glimpse of a smile illuminating, so far as the thing was possible, that dour and stubborn face; and the small, grey, cold-gazing eyes now

and then seemed softened as though by the mist of a dream. Ravaged with spite, jealousy and curiosity, feeling that her brother was slipping through her fingers, Valérie observed the progress of this metamorphosis with a breathless attention, never doubting that there was a woman at the bottom of it and that a great love had entered his life.

Indeed it was true. Josse now spent his life at his bedroom window. A bond of sympathy had sprung up between him and the little boy, who seemed to need his presence. He watched him with delight and tenderness throughout the day, never weary of observing his busy occupations, his play and his stumbling movements, or of hearing the piping sound of his voice. Now and then, half-closing the shutters so as not to be observed by the parents, he used his field-glasses to see him better, enraptured by the details of the small, lively face, the delicate, awkward gestures, all the charm and grace of infancy of which he had in some sort constituted himself the protector. He knew Yvon's habits, his meal-times, the times when he got up and when he went to bed, and he adjusted his own time-table to conform with these, taking his daily walk directly after lunch, when the little boy was having his afternoon rest. On wet days, when he could not play in the garden, Josse kept watch from behind his curtain, hoping for a glimpse of him at a window or the back door of the house, still happy with a sense of enchantment and in the assurance that presently he would see him again. He repeated the words he heard him speak, imitating his baby talk and laughing tenderly aloud. During one of his walks outside the town the small daughter of a countrywoman, walking ahead of him, left her mother's side and ran into the road, where cars were passing. Josse dashed after her, and picked her up and restored her to her mother. They talked for a few minutes about children in general, and suddenly he heard himself say:

'Yours is older than mine. Mine is only two. He's a boy. His name's Yvon.'

He then blushed furiously, for he detested unnecessary lying. But on reflection he came to feel that this usurpation of paternity was not over-presumptuous and might even be justified by the deep feeling that inspired it.

His transformation continued, to the rage and consternation of Valérie, who was helpless in the face of his all too apparent happiness and the gentleness with which he now treated her. Baffled and frustrated in her desire to dominate him, she felt herself to be in the position of an openly betrayed wife, except that she had no rights to invoke and could do nothing but contain her fury as best she might. One evening Josse came down to the living-room not merely with an expression that was almost radiant but positively humming a tune, a thing she had never known him to do before. There was an insolent note of love and happiness in the thin reedy voice that outraged her as though he had slapped her face.

'What are you singing for?' she demanded. 'Some woman, I suppose. Always women! Always filthy songs! Always filth of some kind!'

She went on repeating the words 'filth' and 'filthiness' until her breath failed her. Josse rebuked her serenely, saying in a good-humoured, brotherly way that the charge was quite untrue and that he was far from brooding on obscenities.

'I can assure you I've got something quite different in my head, none of that nonsense. As for women – '

He broke off with a small, meaningful chuckle intended to convey that he was preoccupied with far greater matters. But Valérie misinterpreted it and goaded beyond endurance by his indulgent air she went up to him, thrust her face close to his, and called him a dirty liar and a hypocrite. Josse thought for a moment that she was going to hit him, but instead she burst

into tears and flung her arms round him, calling him her darling brother. She clung to him with extraordinary strength, sobbing convulsively, pressing her cheek and writhing body against him and digging her fingers into his back. Josse in revulsion stamped on her toe and, wrenching his arm free, punched her on the jaw. She still clung to him, seeming not even to be aware of what he was doing, and he had to go on hammering her until she collapsed on the floor, her face swollen and bleeding.

Valérie could not forgive her brother for having seen her in that state of hysteria, and thereafter their life together was overshadowed by the painful memory. At meal-times they ate in almost complete silence, avoiding each other's gaze. Yet for Josse the episode was one of only minor importance which did not affect what had become for him the essence of his daily life. He now lived only for the little boy next door, his only interest was to watch and smile at him. The silent meals left him undisturbed. Indeed they were a relief, since he could pursue without interruption his fond dreams of Yvon.

Two years passed during which brother and sister lived together as though they were strangers. At least in outward aspect; but if Josse's taciturnity was the mark of a genuine indifference it was otherwise in the case of Valérie, whose hatred and longing for revenge sustained her during their silent commerce. She could have turned him out of the house, and indeed was half-inclined to do so; but apart from the material advantage she derived from the existing arrangement she lived in the belief that sooner or later something must happen to humiliate and restore her hold over him. In precise terms she was waiting for the break which, to her idea, must eventually take place between him and the woman who had bewitched him. Valérie, who pictured this creature as a capricious beauty endowed with all the fatal glamour of a film-star, a streetwalker

and an oriental belly-dancer, would have given much to make her acquaintance; but since Josse preserved the most complete secrecy about her, there was little she could do to hasten the rupture. She had to content herself with injuring Josse in minor ways; by dropping grease-spots on his suits and ties and then fraying the cloth by removing them with pumice-stone, and by scorching his collars and shirt-cuffs with an over-hot iron. She went to great trouble to make holes in his underpants, and then repaired them with coloured wool that did not match. The effect of all this was to produce a gradual but perceptible change in Josse's appearance, of which he had always been careful. Without his realising it, Valérie's slow, stealthy campaign – the worn and greasy suits, the badly washed linen, the misshapen shoes (she used the knife-grinder on them) undermined his natural taste for neatness and cleanliness. He fell into the habit of shaving only every two or three days and of scarcely washing when he pulled on his clothes in the morning, so that he both looked and smelt unclean. Valérie observed this outcome of her handiwork with considerable satisfaction, although she was somewhat puzzled to find that he still apparently kept his attraction for a woman of beauty and glamour.

For his part, Josse, perfectly unaware of his sister's sufferings, did nothing intentional to aggravate them. With higher things to occupy his mind he looked back in shame and self-reproach on the afternoons he had spent in fabricating mysteries for her exasperation. However, he clung to the habit of hiding everything of importance from Valérie. He took extreme precautions to ensure that she knew nothing of his affection for the little boy next door, partly because he held her to be undeserving of the knowledge, but even more because he was sure she would do something to upset matters if she found out. Transformed, translated into a world of enchantment, he watched Yvon grow, and seemed himself to grow in company

with him, as though his real life had only begun on the day when he discovered the sweetness of loving. More closely than the parents themselves he followed the little boy's mental and physical progress, meticulously noting and recalling each forward step. He bought a camera and took innumerable snapshots of him, for the sake of concealment sending the films to be developed in a neighbouring town. A bulky registered envelope containing prints reached him nearly every week, and since this bore the printed name and address of the chemist who did the work he gave the postman strict instructions that they were to be handed directly to himself and that no one else was even to be allowed to see them. Valérie's attempts to get round this injunction were unavailing, and her nights were haunted by the problem of those unaccountable missives. She made several attempts to break open his kit-boxes during his increasingly short absences, in the hope of discovering the secret, but in this too she was unsuccessful.

The snapshots were for the most part poor, taken from too far away and at awkward angles, but even the worst had its value for Josse, recalling and fixing a moment in his memory. He pasted them in albums, with dates, comments and anecdotes – 'Twenty-fifth June. He fell down and grazed his poor little knee on the gravel. He started crying and the maid came out. I shouted "tincture of iodine" and she seemed to understand. When he came back into the garden he wasn't crying any more or even limping. But it gave me a fright.' The albums helped Josse to pass the rainy days and the days of winter when he could hope for no more than a glimpse of Yvon. Now and then a snapshot was comparatively successful, and these he had enlarged. Sometimes he would lock his door in the evening, draw the curtains and stage an exhibition. Shifting his bed into the middle of the room (on one occasion Valérie, listening at the door, could not refrain from crying out, 'What are you doing?'

to which he replied, 'Go and wash your feet!') – shifting his bed so that he could walk all round the walls, he removed the photograph of Marshal Foch and the rest of his army souvenirs (most of which ended up by being stowed away in one of his kit-boxes) and covered the walls with snapshots and enlargements. He roamed round the collection for hours on end, pausing to study some particular expression or posture of the little boy, murmuring delightedly to himself, chuckling, sometimes laughing aloud in a way that drove Valérie almost to distraction.

But in the course of time Josse's happiness, which had at first been unalloyed, was subject to tribulations. Yvon's manner changed as he grew older, growing increasingly distant, as though he were becoming aware of the difference in their ages. Their friendship did not seem to be in danger, but he was less disposed to look up and smile, more intent upon himself and his own affairs; and although he appeared not displeased to see Josse at the window, he no longer awaited his coming. On the days when other children came to play with him this attitude was even more marked. He did not smile on these occasions, but glanced up covertly, if he did so at all, and with a hint of impatience, as though he feared that the incongruous friendship might render him ridiculous in the eyes of his small friends. This greatly distressed Josse and led him foolishly to wave and smile the more, without realising that he was embarrassing the child. He sincerely wanted to rejoice at seeing him happy with playfellows of his own age, but was assailed by moments of bitter jealousy when he heartily wished them at the bottom of the sea.

The first time he saw Yvon set off for school, on a morning in October, Josse's anguish was such that he burst into tears. The event was of no less importance in his life than it was for Yvon himself. Once again he changed his routine, and on school mornings went out early and wandered about the town with the

sole object of meeting him on his way home. He awaited these encounters in a state of extreme suspense, for Yvon's behaviour, always unpredictable, was for him a subject of much anxious rumination. In the end he realised that the little boy was only disposed to smile at him when he was by himself. When he was with a schoolfellow he would merely raise his cap with an aloof, almost hostile expression, and sometimes he would pretend not to see him at all. Josse's notions of childhood were too simple and ingenuous for him to be able to conceive that Yvon was ashamed to acknowledge their friendship in public. Nor did it occur to him that this was due not only to his age but also to his worn, shabby clothes, which made him look almost like a tramp: for the five-year-old youngster, brought up in comfortable circumstances, had a natural aversion from the outward signs of poverty. Thus Valérie's stratagem bore unexpected fruit. Without associating the two things, she noted a change in Josse, a greater tendency to ill-humour after Yvon started going to school, from which she cautiously deduced that the creature who had him in thrall was losing interest, and that presently that affair would end and she would come into her own. But she was obliged to concede that Josse still had his good days, and what was even more ominous, the registered envelopes continued to arrive.

It was an oversight on the part of Josse which eventually enabled her to penetrate this mystery. She found an empty envelope bearing the name and address of the chemist's shop, and inventing a pretext to visit the town where it was situated she went there the next day and asked for M. Josse's photographs, saying that she had been asked to call for them. As it happened, a consignment was ready, and these were handed over to her. She looked at them directly she got outside the shop and was at first filled with rage and consternation. The snapshots, ill-focused and taken from above, were not clear

enough for her to be able to recognise the subject at first sight. Her immediate conclusion was that Josse had had a child by his mistress and was keeping its existence secret. However, when she came to examine them more closely, seated on a bench in the park, she recognised their neighbour's house and garden, and thus was able to identify the little boy. The astonishing discovery gave rise to various possibilities, notably of an affair between Josse and the insurance-agent's wife, but none was wholly satisfactory and Valérie's perplexity was extreme. That evening at supper she handed the envelope to Josse, saying casually:

'I happened to look in at the chemist's. . . . They said they had some photographs for you, so I thought I might as well collect them.'

Startled and deeply perturbed, Josse blushed as though he had been caught red-handed in iniquity. There was nothing for it but to confess to his affection for Yvon.

'He's so charming,' he said, foolishly and distressfully laughing. 'So delightful, such a dear little boy.'

His sister smiled, and instantly he knew that he had sullied his secret in surrendering it.

Valérie indeed, now that she knew the truth about what she had mistaken for a guilty passion, was both triumphant and disillusioned. Josse was robbed of all the prestige he had acquired for her when she pictured him revelling in the arms of a woman of ill-fame. This sentimental attachment to a child seemed to her no more than a portent of senility, and she concluded that the sooner he got down to steady gardening the better. She determined to repair the breach with her neighbours, no matter at what cost, and the next day she called on them, ostensibly to discuss a fire-insurance policy on her house. The insurance agent received her somewhat coldly, but when she hinted at the possibility of life-insurance as well he rapidly

thawed and the interview became cordial. She repeated her visit and, with a resourcefulness of which she was rarely capable, contrived before long to reinstate herself on friendly terms with the entire family.

On an April afternoon Josse saw Valérie appear in the next-door garden, accompanied by their neighbour's wife and Yvon. Valérie was positively holding the little boy's hand, and suddenly she picked him up, laughing, and pointed to Josse as he stood thunderstruck at his window. The mother also raised her head and stared at him. Josse sprang back as though he had been stung, and with shaking knees sat down heavily on the bed. The mere sight of Valérie in that garden, on familiar terms with Yvon, was to him an outrage; but even worse was the deliberate and shrewdly calculated violation of his own intimacy with the child, of which the outcome was instantly clear to him. He and Yvon had never spoken a word to one another; there had been nothing between them but mute exchanges. Their friendship had had the charm of secrecy, and perhaps it was this that had made it attractive in the child's eyes. Josse stayed for a long time seated on his bed, nursing his wretchedness, not venturing to return to the window lest he should read reproach in Yvon's gaze, or disdain or, already, indifference. At about six he heard Valérie enter the house and presently come upstairs. Opening his door as she reached the landing he demanded:

'What the devil were you doing over there?'

Valérie smiled and replied in a tone of pretended surprise:

'What are you so cross about? I often run in next door for a friendly visit. They're such nice people, and the little boy is charming, as you said – so well-mannered and affectionate.'

Josse turned pale. She paused for a moment and added softly:

'He's very fond of me, bless his heart.'

'Don't be a fool,' said Josse. 'No one on earth could be fond of you.'

Such was his state of unhappiness that he did not perceive the effect upon his sister of these words, which to him were no more than the statement of an obvious fact. It was now Valérie who changed colour. Her face, and in particular her large, bony nose, took on the sallow tint of unbleached linen; even her small, steely eyes grew pale. But she choked back the abuse rising to her lips, which could only have seemed a confession of weakness, and by a marvel of self-control contrived to smile and say serenely:

'It's really quite extraordinary what a fancy he has taken to me. He runs to meet me whenever I go there and gives me a hug and a kiss, and he calls me his darling Auntie Valérie.'

'Bitch!' muttered Josse. 'You cow!'

With trembling hands and the perspiration rising on his forehead he retreated before his sister as she entered his room. Despite her efforts she could no longer maintain an appearance of calm. She went on in a stifled voice, gabbling the words in her malice and desire to wound:

'I was sorry for you this afternoon. He said he doesn't like you at all. He thinks you're dirty and ugly, and he wishes you wouldn't stare at him.'

Crossing over to the window she looked into the next-door garden where Yvon was playing. She called to him in languishing tones and waved her hand.

'Such a dear little man!' she said, turning back to Josse.

Then she uttered a cry of alarm. Josse was standing by the wardrobe with a revolver in his hand. He no longer looked angry but was considering her with a calmness that slightly reassured her. She made a move towards him to check whatever thought he might have in mind, but he raised the revolver and

put four bullets in her thigh. The sound of the shots, and Valérie's screams, aroused the neighbours. While he awaited their arrival Josse sat on the bed observing his victim as she lay half-conscious on the floor, gratified to think that she would be a cripple for life and, what was more, that this affair would make people look down their noses at her.

At the police-station he declared that he had meant to kill his sister in order to rob her, privately considering this a further blow at Valérie, whose reputation must certainly suffer from the fact that her brother was a would-be murderer and thief. But after he was taken away the superintendent remarked to the sergeant:

'All that was tripe. The fact is, he saw red because the old mare goaded him beyond endurance. It's the same with plenty of decent men who end by killing their wives.'

Josse, in his cell, sat thinking with satisfaction of the years of imprisonment that lay ahead. To him it was as though he had been reborn into a coherent world where regulations and duty fortified the conscience and protected it against sentimental excess.

The Life-Ration

A War-Time Fable

(Extracts from the diary of Jules Flegmon)

10th February. An absurd rumour about new restrictions is going round the neighbourhood. In order to avoid the risk of serious shortages, and to ensure a high margin of productivity, the Government, so people are saying, intend to abolish all unproductive and useless elements in the population – old and retired people, rentiers, unemployables and so forth. Basically, I must say, I think it would not be a bad idea. I ran into Roquenton this morning, that preposterous, impetuous old party, seventy if he's a day, who married a young woman of twenty-four last year. He was almost speechless with fury. 'What has age got to do with it,' he shouted, 'if I make my dear girl happy?' I told him, in well-chosen words, that he should be proud to sacrifice himself for the good of the community.

12th February. No smoke without fire. Lunched today with my old friend, Maleffroi, a commissioner on the Préfecture de la Seine. I loosened him up with a bottle of claret and then pumped him adroitly. Of course there's no question of actually

putting useless mouths to death. The idea is simply to ration their living-time. They're to be entitled to so many days of existence a month, Maleffroi explained, according to their degree of uselessness. It seems that appropriate ration-cards – life-cards as they are to be called – have already been printed. I find the scheme both sensible and conceived in a spirit of poetic justice, and I seem to remember saying some quite witty things about it. Maleffroi, affected no doubt by the excellent wine, gazed at me with eyes brimming with friendship.

13th February. An infamy! An abomination! A monstrous denial of justice! The new decree is published in this morning's papers, and lo and behold, among the elements whose consumption is not counter-balanced by any material productivity of goods and services are included artists and writers! I could at a pinch understand the measure being applied to painters, sculptors and musicians – but writers! There is an illogic in this, a disregard of basic values, that will remain an eternal blot on our civilisation. Clearly the usefulness of writers and least of all my own writings – I say it in all modesty – is not something that can be measured or weighed or demonstrated by any uncouth yardstick such as the bureaucratic mind may be expected to devise. So, then, I am in future to be entitled to only fifteen days of existence a month!

16th February. Since the new decree comes into force on March 1st, and registration must be completed by the 18th of this month, the people condemned by their present position in society to a part-time existence are all rushing frantically round in search of any kind of employment which will enable them to be classified as whole-time livers. But the Government, with diabolical foresight, has issued an order forbidding any changes of address before the 25th.

I had the notion of telephoning Maleffroi to ask him if he could find me a job as a house-porter or museum attendant or something of the sort within the next forty-eight hours. I was too late. He had just given away the last office-boy's job at his disposal.

'Why on earth did you wait so long before getting in touch with me?'

'But how was I to know that I should be affected? You never told me when we lunched together that – '

'Indeed I did. I said quite definitely that the decree would embrace all useless sections of the population.'

17th February. My concierge evidently considers me half-dead already, a ghost, a shade occasionally emerging from the nether regions, for this morning she forgot to bring me my mail. I gave her a severe telling-off when I went downstairs. 'It is for the sake of pampering idlers of your sort,' I said, 'that many of the cream of the nation are being compelled to sacrifice a part of their existence.' A profoundly true observation. The more I think about it, the more monstrously unjust this decree seems to me to be.

Met Roquenton and his young wife. Really I felt sorry for him. He is only getting six days of life a month; and what is even worse, Mme Roquenton, because of her youth, is getting fifteen. The thought of this interlude has plunged the poor old boy in despair. The lady seems more philosophical about it.

During the day I met several people who are unaffected by the decree. Their lack of understanding, and their indifference to the sacrifices of others, fill me with disgust. They treat this abomination as though it were the most natural thing in the world, and even seem to be delighted by it. The egotism of the human race is beyond belief.

18th February. Queued for three hours at the Mairie of the Eighteenth Arrondissement to get my life-card. There were about two thousand of us in double file – pitiful victims of the insatiable greed of the working class. And this was only a first sample. From what I could see the proportion of elderly people was only about half. There were pretty young women with saddened faces who seemed to be sighing, 'I don't want to die yet.' The professionals of love were numerous. The decree has hit them very hard in limiting their life-ration to seven days a month. One of them complained in my hearing that the effect would condemn her to remain a prostitute for the rest of her life. A week was not long enough for a man to grow attached to a girl, she said. I am not so sure of that. Among those in the queue I noticed (not unmoved; and indeed, I must confess, with a secret satisfaction) a good many of my Montmartre friends, writers and painters – Céline, Gen Paul, Daragnès, Fauchois, Soupault, Tintin, d'Esparbès and others. Céline was in one of his black moods. He said that the whole thing was just another Jewish conspiracy, but in this I think his ill-temper has led him astray. The decree specifically states that all Jews, irrespective of age, sex or calling, are to be allowed only one half-day of life a month. In general the crowd was bad-tempered and rowdy. The large number of police keeping order treated us with the utmost contempt, evidently regarding us as no more than the dregs of humanity. More than one of us got booted on the bottom for complaining about the time we were kept waiting. I endured this humiliation with silent dignity, but I looked hard at one particular sergeant while my whole being cried out in protest. It is we who today are the damned upon earth.

At last I got my life-card, a book of coupons each of which entitles the holder to twenty-four hours of existence. The coupons are a delicate, periwinkle blue, so soft and tender that it brought tears to my eyes.

24th February. I wrote to the competent authority a week ago asking for my case to be reconsidered. I have been granted a supplementary life-ration of twenty-four hours. Better than nothing.

5th March. For ten days I have been living a life of feverish activity which has caused me to neglect my diary. In order to waste nothing of my curtailed existence I have practically gone without sleep. During the past four days I have written as much as I would normally do in three weeks, yet my style has lost none of its brilliance nor my thinking any of its profundity. I have grasped at every pleasure with an equal frenzy. I would like to possess every pretty woman I set eyes on, if the thing were possible. Partly from a desire to make the most of every moment, but perhaps also in a spirit of revenge, I make a point of eating two large black-market meals every day. Today for lunch I had three dozen oysters, two poached eggs, a wing of goose, a plate of roast beef, vegetables, salad, cheese, a sweet with chocolate sauce, a grapefruit and three tangerines. Although I did not for a moment forget my melancholy fate, I drank my coffee at the end with a certain feeling of contentment. Shall I end by becoming a complete stoic? Just after leaving the restaurant I ran into the Roquentons. It is poor Roquenton's last day for March. Tonight at midnight, having used his last coupon, he will lapse into a state of non-being for twenty-five days.

7th March. Called upon young Madame Roquenton, a grass-widow since midnight. She received me with a graciousness which her unhappy state made even more charming. We talked of all kinds of things, including her husband. She told me how he had vanished into nothingness. They were both in bed. At a minute to midnight Roquenton took her hand and gave her his

last instructions. As the hour struck she felt his hand melt, so to speak, in hers. There was no longer anything at her side but an empty pair of pyjamas and a set of false teeth on the pillow. We were both deeply moved by her recital, and when I saw the tears brimming in Lucette's eyes I took her in my arms.

12th March. Went yesterday evening to have a drink at the flat of Perruque, the Academician. In order to preserve the myth that those artistic throw-outs are 'immortal' the Government has put them all in the whole-time life category. Perruque's complacency and hypocrisy were really revolting. There were about fifteen of us there, all rationed and using up our last coupons for the month. Perruque was the only whole-lifer. He patronised us as though we were hospital cases, full of sympathy, but with a malicious twinkle in his eye, and overflowing with promises to look after our interests in our absence. The old mountebank was so obviously delighted at being one up on us that it was all I could do to stop myself telling him what I think of him and the dreary, turgid rubbish he puts on paper. I'd have done it too, if I didn't hope to succeed him one of these days in the Academy.

13th March. Lunched with the Dumonts. They quarrelled as usual. Dumont cried: 'My God, if only I could use my life coupons in the second half of the month, so as not to be alive at the same time as you!' He obviously meant it, and Mme Dumont wept.

16th March. Lucette Roquenton vanished into limbo last night. She was very frightened and so I thought I had better be there to comfort her. I arrived at about half-past nine to find her already in bed. To spare her the anguish of the last moments I managed to put the bedside clock back a quarter of an hour.

Five minutes before the plunge she burst into tears, but thinking that she still had twenty minutes to go she recovered and insisted on powdering her nose, which I thought rather touching. As the moment approached I did not take my eyes off her. She was laughing at something I had said, and suddenly the laugh was cut short and she vanished beneath my gaze as though it were a conjuring trick. I touched the warm place where her body had lain and was gripped by the silence that overtakes us in the presence of death. It was very painful. Even now, as I write these lines by the light of morning, I still feel acutely distressed. From the moment I awoke I have been counting the hours that remain to me. My turn comes at midnight. . . .

I add these lines with a quarter of an hour to go. I have got into bed, and I wish my temporary death to find me pen in hand, exercising my profession. This seems to me a suitably courageous attitude. It is the kind of gallantry I prefer, elegant and unostentatious. After all, how do I know whether this death is really temporary, or whether it will be simply death? The promise of resurrection does not convince me. I find myself wondering whether, after all, it is merely an ingenious official device for concealing the truth. If none of the rationed returns to life in a fortnight's time, who will stand up for their rights? Not their heirs, of that we can be certain! And what good would it do if they did stand up for them? The thought has suddenly occurred to me that the official date of our resurrection is the first of next month – April Fool's Day! I am terrified – I believe I am go . . .

1st April. I'm alive! Not an April fool after all! And I had no sense whatever of the passing of time. I woke up in bed in the same state of panic that overtook me just before my death. My diary was lying on the coverlet, but when I tried to finish the

sentence I had been writing I found that my fountain-pen was dry. When I saw that the clock had stopped at ten past four, and my watch at about the same time, I began to realise what had happened. I rang up Maleffroi to ask him the date. He was not best pleased at being woken up in the middle of the night and my delight at being restored to life left him tolerably unmoved. But I had to talk to someone.

'You see,' I said, 'the distinction between spatial time and experienced time is not merely a metaphysical fantasy. I am the living proof. The fact is, there's no such thing as absolute time.'

'Possibly. But that doesn't alter the fact that it's half-past twelve. If you don't mind – '

'It's a very comforting thought. The fortnight I haven't lived is not necessarily lost to me. I expect to make it up later on.'

'Well, good luck to you,' said Maleffroi, 'and good night.'

When I went out at about nine o'clock this morning I had a sense of abrupt change. The season had made a leap forward. The trees were breaking into leaf, the air was fresher, the streets had a new look. The idea that the world had been able to get on without me for a fortnight caused me some dismay and still does. I met a number of people also resuscitated during the night, and we exchanged notes. Old Mme Bordier buttonholed me for twenty mintues while she told me how she had lived through fifteen days of ecstasy detached from her body. But Bouchardon was the funniest of all. He went off in his sleep on the night of the fifteenth, and woke up this morning convinced that he had somehow been overlooked and that nothing had happened. When I met him he was on his way to attend a wedding which must have been celebrated a fortnight ago. I did not undeceive him.

2nd April. Went to tea with the Roquentons. The old man was

in high spirits. Since he had no sensation of the passing of time, the events which occurred during his absence have no reality for him; and he is quite incapable of imagining that his wife could have been unfaithful during the nine days she was left alone. Well, so much the better. Lucette kept gazing at me with languishing eyes. I dislike these furtive demonstrations behind other people's backs.

3rd April. I can't get over my fury. While I was dead Perruque contrived to have the opening of the Mérimée Museum postponed till the 18th. As the old scoundrel knows perfectly well, I was to have delivered an important speech which might have done a great deal to assist my election to the Academy. But by the 18th I shall be back in limbo.

7th April. Roquenton has gone off again, this time with perfect good humour. He invited me to dinner, and when midnight struck we were drinking champagne in the salon. Roquenton was actually standing up, and suddenly we saw his clothes collapse in a heap on the floor. The effect was comical, I must say, but I thought Lucette's wild burst of gaiety somewhat excessive.

12th April. Today I received a most harrowing visit from a man of about forty, extremely poor, nervous and obviously ill. He was a workman with a wife and three children, and he wanted to sell me some of his life-coupons to buy food for his family. His wife was a semi-invalid, he told me, and he himself was not well enough at present to do a full-time job. His earnings and sickness allowance was barely enough to keep them above the starvation line. It was a pathetic case, but the idea of buying his coupons filled me with embarrassment. It made me feel like an ogre, a fabulous monster exacting a tribute of human flesh. I

said I couldn't accept them and offered him a sum of money for nothing; but this touched his pride, and he refused to take it except in exchange for one or more days of existence. In the end, since I could not persuade him, I bought one coupon, and after he had left I put it away in a drawer, resolved not to use it. To take a day of another man's life seems to me odious.

14th April. Met Maleffroi in the métro. He told me that the system of life-rationing is beginning to give results. Since the well-to-do are particularly hard hit, business is a great deal less brisk on the black market and prices are coming down in consequence. They are hoping, in high places, that the black market will finally disappear altogether. It seems that the people as a whole are getting more food, and Maleffroi remarked that the Parisians are beginning to look healthier, a statement which I received with mixed feelings.

'And what is no less remarkable,' said Maleffroi, 'is the tranquil and relaxed atmosphere in which we live when the life-rationed people are out of the way. It makes one realise what a danger the rich are to society, to say nothing of the unemployed, the intellectuals and the tarts. They do nothing but stir up trouble, agitation, disorder and a yearning for the impossible.'

15th April. Refused an invitation to the Cardonnets' 'passing-out' party. It is becoming fashionable, among the jazz set, to hold parties on the night of their temporary death, and I am told that these often develop into orgies. Disgusting.

16th April. I go off this evening. No alarm.

1st May. On coming to life again at midnight I had a slight shock. My provisional death (this is the expression in current use) came upon me while I was dressed and on my feet, and I

returned to find myself naked with my clothes on the floor. The same thing happened to the painter, Roudot, who was giving a party to a number of friends of both sexes, all due to pass out at midnight. The effect must have been rather funny. This month of May promises to be so beautiful that I hate having to miss the second half.

5th May. During my last life-spell I had the feeling that some antagonism was springing up between the whole-time lifers and the rest of us. This seems to have grown more acute, and certainly no one can now deny that it exists. It is a matter of jealousy, which, surprisingly, appears to be mutual. That the people who are rationed should be jealous and even deeply resentful of the privileged class is perfectly understandable. But as I am beginning to realise there is jealousy on the other side as well. The whole-time lifers secretly envy the rest of us as the initiates of a mystery, a flight into the unknown, in which they have no share; and the feeling is heightened by the fact that this barrier of limbo is something which is far more obvious to them than to us, since we have no awareness of it. To them our relative death seems like a holiday, while they are compelled to keep their noses to the grindstone. The general effect is to make them gloomy and bad-tempered, whereas we on the other hand, always conscious of the swift passing of time and the need to make the most of what is allowed us, are altogether better humoured. I thought of this today while I was lunching with Maleffroi. Disillusioned and sardonic, and at moments positively aggressive, he went out of his way to sympathise with me in my hard fate and to stress his own good fortune – obviously in an attempt to convince himself. He talked as one might do to a friend belonging to an enemy country.

8th May. Today a very questionable-looking individual

knocked at the door and offered to sell me life coupons at 200 francs each. He had fifty to dispose of. I sent him off with a flea in his ear, and only the fact that he was rather large saved him from being kicked downstairs.

10th May. Roquenton went off four days ago, for the third time. I haven't seen Lucette since he went. I gather she has taken up with some nondescript blond young man. I can imagine the type – some young jazz-loving oaf. Anyway I couldn't care less. The silly little creature never had any sense or good taste, a thing I realised from the first.

12th May. The black market in life-coupons is growing on an immense scale. The spivs go to the poorer working people and talk them into selling a few days of life so as to be able to buy extra food for their families. Old men with nothing but workers' pensions and the wives of prisoners of war are also easy game. The present rate varies between 200 francs and 250. I doubt if it will go much higher, because the number of wealthy or even well-off people is small compared with the number of the poor. Apart from which, a great many people refuse to treat human life as a thing to be bought and sold like merchandise. I shall not compromise with my conscience.

14th May. Madame Dumont has lost her life-card. It's a most awkward thing to happen because to get a new one takes about two months. She accuses her husband of having hidden it so as to get rid of her. I don't think he would do anything so disgraceful. The spring has never been so beautiful as it is this year. I regret having to die the day after tomorrow.

16th May. Dined last night at Baroness Klim's. The only whole-time lifer among the guests was Monseigneur De-

labonne. There was talk of the black market in life-coupons, and I said that I considered it an infamous business. I was completely sincere, but perhaps I also hoped to make a good impression on the Bishop, who has great influence in the elections to the Academy. I felt a certain chilliness in the gathering, and Monseigneur smiled indulgently at me as though I were a youthful priest carried away by apostolic zeal. The subject was dropped, but after dinner the Baroness broached it again to me in confidence. She told me she thought I was mistaken, and that my immense and widely recognised talent as a writer, the depth of my views and the important part I had to play, imposed on me the moral obligation to prolong an active life devoted to the enrichment of thought and the service of the nation. Seeing me much moved, she invoked the support of the assembled company. They were unanimous in reproaching me with high-minded but sentimental scruples which run counter to the true spirit of the Decree. Monseigneur, being asked his opinion, refused to commit himself but replied with a far-reaching parable. A hard-working and capable farmer is short of land, whereas his neighbours let theirs go to waste. So he buys some of their fields and ploughs and sows and reaps rich harvests for the benefit of everyone.

I allowed the brilliant gathering to talk me round, and this morning was still sufficiently convinced to buy five additional life-coupons. I intend to go into the country and justify this supplementary spell of life by working like mad on my book.

20th May. Have been in Normandy for the last four days. Except for an occasional stroll I have done nothing but work. The local farming population scarcely knows of the existence of life-cards. Even the old people get twenty-five days life a month. I asked an elderly peasant to sell me a coupon, since I needed an extra day to finish a chapter, and I said that the price

in Paris is 200 francs. He positively laughed at me. 'Only two hundred! Do you know what we get for pork on the hoof?' So there was no deal. I'm catching the train to Paris tomorrow afternoon so as to be able to die in comfort in my own home.

3rd June. What a business! The train was late and my provisional death overtook me a few minutes before we reached Paris. I came to life again in the same compartment, but the train was on a railway-siding in Nantes. Of course I was stark naked. The embarrassment and trouble it caused me have left me feeling quite ill. Fortunately I had been travelling with an acquaintance who had my clothes sent to my flat.

4th June. Ran into Melina Badin, the actress, who told me a most preposterous story. It seems that some of her admirers clubbed together to give her an extra spell of life, with the result that on May 15th last she found herself with twenty-one coupons in hand. And she claims that she used the lot, meaning that last month she lived thirty-six days. I thought it well to adopt a frivolous attitude.

'May was a truly gallant month,' I said, 'since it prolonged itself solely for your sake.'

Melina seemed genuinely put out by my refusal to believe her. I think she must have gone off her head.

11th June. Dramatic events have taken place at the Roquentons'. I only heard about it this afternoon. On the fifteenth of last month Lucette was visited by her blond-haired jazz-fan and at midnight they went into limbo together. When they came back to life they were still in bed but no longer alone. There was Roquenton, also resuscitated, between the two of them! Lucette and the young man pretended not to know one another, but it seems that Roquenton considers this highly improbable.

12th June. Life-coupons are now selling at fantastic prices and it's impossible to get one under 500 francs. It seems that the poor are becoming more miserly with their lives and the rich more greedy. I bought ten at the beginning of the month, when the price was still round about 200, and the next day I had a letter from my Uncle Antoine, in Orléans, sending me nine more. The poor man was having such a bad bout of rheumatism that he preferred to go into limbo while he got over it. So now I have nineteen coupons, five more than I need, since there are only thirty days in the month. I shall have no trouble in selling them.

15th June. Maleffroi dropped in on me yesterday in the best of humours. The fact that some people are paying large sums of money in order to be able to live all through the month, like he does, has quite restored his hopeful outlook. It was all that was needed to convince him that the whole-time lifers are to be envied.

20th June. Am working at high pressure. If rumour is to be believed Melina Badin was not as mad as she sounded. Any number of people claim to have lived more than thirty-one days last month. I have met several myself. Well, of course, there are people who will believe anything.

22nd June. To pay Lucette out, Roquenton spent ten thousand francs on life-coupons which he kept for his own use. She has been in limbo for a week. But I think he now regrets it. Solitude seems to weigh heavily on him. I find him very much changed, scarcely recognisable.

27th June. The story that last month was increased in length for people possessing sufficient coupons is gaining ground. Laverdon, a man whose word one would ordinarily accept,

assures me that he lived thirty-five days. I am afraid this life-rationing must be affecting people's minds.

28th June. Roquenton died yesterday morning – not provisional death but the real thing, probably due to grief. The funeral is tomorrow. When Lucette comes back on July 1st she will find herself a widow.

32nd June. It seems, after all, that time has dimensions of which we knew nothing. The whole thing is most confusing. Yesterday I bought a newspaper at a kiosk and found that it was dated the 31st June.

'Hullo!' I said. 'Has the month got thirty-one days?'

The woman in the kiosk, whom I know, stared uncomprehendingly at me. I glanced at the headlines and read: 'Mr Churchill to visit New York from the 39th to the 45th.'

In the street I heard two men talking 'I've got to be in Orléans on the thirty-seventh,' one of them said.

A few minutes later I ran into Bonrivage, drifting along with a haggard look. He told me of his bewilderment and I said what I could to comfort him. We have simply got to take things as they come. But in the course of the afternoon a thought suddenly struck me. The whole-time lifers are quite unaware of any anomaly in the unfolding of time. It is only the people in my category, who have fraudulently procured for themselves the prolongation of this month of June, who are dumbfounded by what is happening. Malefroi, when I told him about it, did not understand a word I said and thought I was raving. But what do I care how long time lasts! Since last night I have been madly in love. We met at Maleffroi's apartment as it happens, and fell in love at first sight. Adorable Elisa!

34th June. Saw Elisa yesterday and again today. I have found

the right woman at last. We're engaged. She is leaving tomorrow to spend three weeks with relatives in the Unoccupied Zone and we are to be married when she gets back. My heart is too overflowing with happiness for me to be able to speak of it, even in this diary.

35th June. Took Elisa to the station. As she got into the train she said, 'I'll do my very best to be back before the 60th.' Upon reflection this rather perturbs me. I've used up my last life-coupon today. What will the date be for me tomorrow?

1st July. People to whom I mention the 35th June don't know what I'm talking about. Those five days have left no trace in their memory. Fortunately I met a few people who had lived them fraudulently, as I did, and I could talk to them about them. But they were queer conversations. For me yesterday was the 35th June, but for some people it was the 32nd or the 45th. I met a man in a restaurant who had lived to June 66th, which called for thirty-six black market coupons.

2nd July. At first I thought that I would not trouble to go out, assuming that Elisa was away. But then a doubt assailed me and I rang her up. She said she didn't know me and had never set eyes on me. I did my utmost to explain that without realising it she had lived through days of rapture in my company. Amused but by no means convinced, she agreed to meet me on Thursday. Desperately apprehensive.

4th July. The newspapers are full of the 'Life-coupon Racket', which looks like being the biggest scandal of the season. The rich have bought up so many life coupons that the saving in food and the increased productivity which the decree was designed to bring about are practically negligible. Apart from this there

are special cases which have aroused great indignation. One is that of Monsieur Wadé, the multi-millionaire, who appears to have lived 1,967 days between June 30th and July 1st – in other words, five years and four months! I met the celebrated philosopher, Yves Mironneau. He explained to me that every individual lives countless millenniums but that our consciousness only has brief, intermittent glimpses of that infinity, and that it is these, put together, which constitute our lives. He said other things, even more profound and subtle, but I must confess I did not follow him very well. The truth is, my thoughts were elsewhere. I call upon Elisa tomorrow.

5th July. I have seen Elisa. All is over and I have nothing more to hope for. She admitted finally that she remembered having met me at Maleffroi's. She did not seem to doubt my sincerity and perhaps was even touched by it, but it evoked no tenderness on her side, nor even any sympathy. I suspect that Maleffroi is the one she's interested in. Anyway, all my eloquence was in vain. The spark that was struck between us that evening of the 31st June was due to nothing but chance, the mood of the moment. And then people talk about the affinity of souls. I am suffering the tortures of the damned. Well perhaps it will inspire me to write a best-seller.

6th July. Life-cards have been abolished. As if I cared!

The Last

THERE was once a racing cyclist named Martin who always came in last, and the onlookers laughed to see him so far behind the others. He wore a vest of tender blue with a small periwinkle embroidered on the left breast. Doubled over the handlebars and with a handkerchief gripped between his teeth, he pedalled no less courageously than the winner, attacking the steepest slopes with so much fervour that a flame gleamed in his eyes; and seeing that clear and candid gaze and the muscles knotted with exertion, people said to one another:

'Well, Martin seems to be in form today. That's good. Perhaps this time he'll arrive at Tours (or Bordeaux, or Orléans, or Dunkirk) somewhere in the middle.'

But every time was like every other time and Martin was always last. He never lost hope of doing better, but he worried a little because he had a wife and children to support and there is not much to be made out of coming in last. He worried, but no one ever heard him complain that fate was treating him unjustly. When he arrived at Tours (or Marseilles or Cherbourg) he would be welcomed with laughter and jesting by the crowd.

'Hullo, Martin! You're first, starting at the wrong end!'

And Martin, hearing these words, never displayed the slightest ill-humour. If he glanced round it was with a gentle

smile, as though to say, 'Yes, here I am, Martin, I'm last again, but next time I shall do better.'

The other competitors would nudge one another and say:

'Well, how's it going, Martin? Are you satisfied with the result?'

'Yes,' Martin would reply. 'I'm not dissatisfied.'

He did not see that they were making fun of him, and when they laughed he laughed with them. He watched without envy as they went off surrounded by their friends and admirers, fêted and flattered, although he was left alone, for there was never anyone to greet him at the winning-post. His wife and children lived in a village on the road between Paris and Orléans, and he only saw them at rare intervals, and just in passing, when the race happened to go that way. Clearly if one lives for an ideal one cannot expect to live like other people: Martin loved his wife and children but he was a racing cyclist and he raced, only pausing to rest between the stages. He sent a little money home when he had any and he often thought of his family, never during the race when he had more important things to think about, but in the evenings while he massaged his tired legs after the long day's ride.

Before he went to sleep Martin made his prayer to God, telling Him all about the stage he had covered during the day, without ever pausing to consider that he might be trying the Divine patience. He took it for granted that God was as much interested in bicycle-racing as in anything else, and he was right: for if God had not a thorough understanding of all pursuits He would not know how hard it is for a man to keep his soul in order.

'Dear God,' said Martin, 'the same thing happened again today. I don't know why it is, but it's always the same. Yet I've got a good bike and it's no use saying I haven't. The other day I wondered if perhaps there was something a bit wrong with the

pedals, so I stripped it down, every bit, calmly and methodically, the way I'm talking to You now. I found that there was nothing wrong with the pedals, or with anything else. If anyone tries to say it isn't a good bike I can only answer that it *is* a good bike, in good order, a good, sound make. Well, then? Well, of course, there's the question of the man – the muscles, the willpower, the intelligence. But the man, God, is Your affair. That's what I tell myself and that's why I don't complain. I know perfectly well that someone has to be last, and its nothing to be ashamed of. I'm not complaining. I just thought I'd mention it.'

After which he closed his eyes and slept soundly till morning; and when he awoke he said happily:

'Today I'm going to be first.'

He laughed in delight, thinking of the little girl who would present him with a bunch of flowers when he came in first, and the money he would send to his wife. He pictured the newspaper headlines – 'Martin Takes the Poligny–Strasbourg Stage: Wins in a Sprint after a Hard-Fought Race.' And thinking of this he felt sorry for the runners-up and the ones who came in nowhere, especially the last, whom he loved like a brother without knowing him.

That evening he arrived at Strasbourg in his usual place, amid the jesting and the laughter. He was disappointed and a little surprised, but in the morning he started on the next stage as sure as ever that he would win. Every morning and every departure saw the renewal of that miracle of hope.

On the eve of the Paris–Marseilles race a rumour spread through bicycling circles that Martin was preparing a sensational surprise for the public, and fifty-three reporters rushed to interview him.

'My views on the theatre?' said Martin. 'Well, once when we

stopped the night at Carcassonne I went to see "Faust" at the Municipal Theatre and I couldn't help feeling sorry for that girl, Marguerite. What I say is, if Faust had known what it means to have a decent bike he wouldn't have been at a loose end the way he was, and he wouldn't have gone making trouble for the poor girl and she'd have found herself a good husband. That's what I think. And now if you want to know who's going to be first at Marseilles I'll tell you without making any bones about it – I shall be the winner.'

After the reporters had left Martin received a scented missive, inviting him to tea, from a lady named Liane. She was a woman of loose life such as are all too numerous, as deficient in morals as she was in correct behaviour. Martin went to keep the appointment in all innocence, going straight from the racetrack, where he had been riding a few practice-laps to make sure his machine was in good order, and taking with him a small case containing his cycling kit.

He chatted artlessly about racing, the tactics to be pursued and the care that must be taken of one's bike and one's person, while the seductress plied him with cunning questions.

'Tell me, Monsieur Martin, how do you massage a leg?'

Saying which she offered him a leg as it were for the purpose of demonstration. But Martin merely grasped that limb of perdition with no more concern than if it had belonged to a fellow-cyclist and explained calmly:

'Well, you see, you start at the calf and work your way up, like this. Of course, it's more difficult in the case of a woman because of the layer of adipose tissue.'

'Yes, I see. How cleverly you do it. What firm hands you have. Well, now, when it comes to the stomach-muscles . . .'

But we will spare our readers. Suffice to say that Martin replied to the infamous creature's questions with a perfect simplicity, quite unaware of her insidious designs. When finally

she asked what he had in his case he did not hesitate to open it and show her his vest and shorts and cycling shoes.

'Monsieur Martin,' she said, 'I would dearly love to see you dressed as a cyclist. I have never met one before.'

'Oh, all right,' said Martin. 'I'll go and slip them on in the next room, for the sake of decency.'

When he returned he found the lady even more lightly clad than himself, but we will not dwell upon the details. Martin did not turn a hair. Gravely surveying the shameless display he said with a shake of his head:

'I see that you too are thinking of taking up bicycle-racing. Let me be frank. In my opinion it is not a suitable pursuit for a woman. It is not your legs I am worrying about. I daresay that with training they would be as good as my own. But you must bear in mind that women possess bosoms, and when one has to ride a hundred and fifty miles in a day the surplus weight becomes excessive. In addition to which one must never overlook the possibility of children.'

So touched was Liane by these words of wisdom and innocence that for the first time in her life she perceived the desirability of virtue. Filled with abhorrence of her many sins she burst into repentant tears and said:

'I have been mad and misguided, but now all that is over.'

'Well, there's no harm done,' said Martin. 'Now that you've seen me in cycling-kit I'll go next door and get dressed again, for the sake of decency. You'd better be doing the same, and I hope you'll give up this idea of racing.'

He left the apartment with her gratitude ringing in his ears, having restored to the wretched outcast her honour and the bliss of living at peace with her conscience. His photograph appeared that day in the evening papers. This occasioned him neither pleasure nor pride, since he had no need of advertisement to sustain his quiet confidence. The next day by the

time the race left Paris he had fallen into the last place as usual, and here he remained till the end. When he reached Arles he learned that the leaders had already got to Marseilles, but he did not give up. He went on pedalling with all his might, still with a hope lurking in his heart that although the race was over he would somehow or other contrive to be first. The newspapers, furious at being deceived, assailed him with savagely sardonic comment couched in technical language unintelligible to any save the readers of sporting prints. But this did not prevent Martin from continuing to hope, or Liane from opening a *crèmerie* in the Rue de la Fidelité under the sign of 'The Good Cyclist', where eggs were sold a halfpenny cheaper than elsewhere.

As he gained in age and experience so did Martin's ardour increase, and he entered nearly as many races as there were saints in the calendar. He gave himself no rest. No sooner had he finished one race than he signed on for the next. The hair began to turn white over his temples, his back was bowed and he became the doyen of racing cyclists. But he did not know this, and indeed he seemed to be unconscious of his age. He never failed to come in last, and as time went on he lagged further and further behind.

'Dear God,' he murmured in his prayers, 'I don't understand. I don't know what the trouble is.'

One day as he was struggling up a familiar hill on the run from Paris to Orléans he found that he had a flat tyre. He stopped at the side of the road to repair it, and two women approached him. One of them, who was carrying a young child in her arms, inquired:

'Do you happen to know a racing-cyclist named Martin?'

He answered mechanically:

'I'm Martin. I'm last, but I shall do better next time.'

'Martin,' said the woman, 'I am your wife.'

He looked up without stopping work on the tyres and said tenderly:

'I'm glad to see you.' And gazing at the child, which he took to be one of his own, he said: 'I see the youngsters are doing well.'

His wife looked embarrassed. Pointing to the young woman who was with her she said:

'This is your daughter, Martin. She's as tall as you are. She's married, and so are your sons.'

'I'm glad. I had not realised they were so old. How quickly time passes. And is that my grandson you are carrying?'

The younger woman turned away her head and it was her mother who answered:

'No, Martin, this is my child, not hers. Seeing that you never came home . . .'

Martin began to pump up his tyre without saying anything. When he straightened himself he saw tears running down his wife's cheeks and he murmured:

'You know how it is if you're a racing-cyclist, you don't belong to yourself any more. I often think of you, but of course that isn't the same as being there.'

The baby burst out crying and it seemed that nothing would soothe it. Martin was greatly distressed. He blew with his bicycle-pump under its nose saying in a little, squeaky voice – 'Boo, boo, boo!'

The baby began to crow. Martin kissed it and took leave of his family.

'I've lost five minutes, but I don't mind, particularly as I can easily make them up. This is going to be my race, I'm sure of it.'

He mounted and rode off, and the two women stood for a time watching him as he toiled painfully up the hill. He rode

standing on the pedals, bringing his whole weight to bear first on one side and then on the other.

'How hard he's finding it,' his wife murmured. 'In the old days, even fifteen years ago, he could get up any hill simply with the strength of his legs, without moving from the saddle.'

Martin reached the crest, going so slowly that it seemed as though at any moment he must stop. His figure, while he free-wheeled, appeared for an instant against the sky-line, and then his blue vest melted into the summer sky.

Martin knew the roads of France better than anyone else alive, and each of their countless milestones wore for him a familiar face. The time came when he had to walk up the hills, pushing his machine and gasping with fatigue; but still he trusted in his star.

'I'll make it up on the downward slope,' he said. And when he reached the end of the stage in the evening (or sometimes it was the next day) he was always surprised to find that he was not first.

'Dear God, I don't know how it happened . . .'

Deep wrinkles furrowed his lean face which had the colour of autumn roads, and his hair was snowy white; but the spark of youth still gleamed in his weather-worn eyes. His vest flapped loosely on his bowed, skinny back, its periwinkle blue so faded that it seemed to be woven of dust and mist. He could no longer afford to travel by train to the starting point of a race, but this did not trouble him. Arriving at Bayonne three days after the riders had departed, he leapt into the saddle and set off instantly for Roubaix where another race was due to begin. He covered the length of France, walking uphill, pedalling on the flat, sleeping while he coasted downhill, and never stopping by day or by night.

'It's splendid training,' he said.

But when he got to Roubaix he found that the riders had left a week before. He shook his head and murmured as he remounted:

'It's a pity. I should certainly have won. Well, there's always the Grenoble–Marseilles race. I have only to push on into the Alps.'

He arrived too late at Grenoble, and at Paris, Perpignan, Brest and Cherbourg. He was always too late.

'It's a shame,' he said in a small, quavering voice. 'It really is a shame. But I shall catch up.'

Undismayed he left Provence for Britanny, Artois for Roussilon, the Jura for the Vendée; and now and then, nodding at the milestones as he passed, he said:

'It's splendid training.'

He grew so old that he could scarcely see, but his friends the milestones, even the little ones marking every hundred metres, told him when to turn left or right. His bicycle had also grown very old. It was now of an unknown make, so ancient that even historians had never heard of it. The enamel had all worn off, and the rust was only hidden by the mud and dust of the road. The wheels had lost nearly all their spokes, but Martin was now so light that the five or six that remained were enough to carry him.

'Dear God,' he said, 'At least I have a good bike. I have no need to worry on that score.'

He was riding on the rims and the machine set up such a rattling that urchins in the streets threw stones at him crying:

'Crazy Dick, take your bit of old iron to the scrap-heap!'

'I shall catch up,' said Martin, who had grown hard of hearing.

For years, he went on trying to enter a race, but he always

arrived too late. Then one day he left Narbonne for Paris, where the 'Tour de France' was due to begin. He arrived exactly a year late, and learned to his delight that the riders had left only an hour before.

'I'll catch them up by the evening,' he said, 'and I'll certainly win the second stage.'

As he rode out through the Port Maillot a lorry knocked him over. Martin staggered to his feet, still grasping the handlebars of his shattered bicycle.

'I shall catch up,' he said before he died.

ALSO BY MARCEL AYMÉ

The Green Mare

translated by Norman Denny

There existed between the families of Haudouin and Maloret, in the village of Claquebue, an ancient hatred that was pure and flawless inasmuch as it was born of no open quarrel, not even of any conflict of interests. Its roots had to be looked for in the hearts of the families themselves, in their respective natures, their intimacies, their attitude to love. But there was one episode which might have brought about the long-threatened explosion had not circumstances caused it to be passed over, so that for a period of years it remained as it were dormant, a smouldering spark. Then circumstances, arising out of the political projects of Ferdinand Haudouin, brought it to light again, and Honoré, his brother, was moved at last to take the revenge he had long craved for.

Such is the substance of this gay and tender and mocking Rabelaisian fantasy of French village life during the latter half of the last century: but the story is punctuated throughout by the searching and sometimes startling comments of the miraculous portrait of the miraculous Green Mare, which concludes its several discourses by modestly observing: 'It is a fortunate circumstance that a Green Mare should have been present to point in a sturdy and straightforward fashion the moral of this tale, namely that there can be no enduring love, rooted in true happiness, except within the family.'

'M. Aymé is one of the contemporary masters of entertainment . . . what a civilized and amusing novel it is, this comedy of bucolic love and lust . . .'

New Statesman