

# MAURICE PONS

## MADemoiselle B

A NOVEL



translated by  
PATRICIA WOLFE

# MADEMOISELLE B. MAURICE PONS

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In Jouff, the village on the banks of the Flanne River where Maurice Pons lives, strange rumors have been circulating about a certain Mademoiselle B. Some townspeople think she's the devil, some think she's a bat. At some moments she looks seventeen; at others seventy. The men who are drawn to her small, isolated house behind the dyke don't have long to live. They're found drowned in the Flanne, or hanged from an oak, or crushed upon the highways, in suspicious circumstances.

What strange power does Mademoiselle B. unleash in her victims that pushes them to a violent death? The police, the judge, and the priest don't even want to know. . . .

But Maurice Pons, who by chance and almost despite himself becomes involved in these inexplicable suicides, pursues a rigorous investigation. He attempts to cut through the mystery behind this white lady who haunts his dreams and his daily life. . . .

And in the minute-by-minute retelling of events that border on the unreal, he offers us the extraordinary confession of a writer who is victim of his own fantasies.

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MADemoiselle B.

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A NOVEL

Translated by Patricia Wolf

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*Amour en latin faict amor  
Or doncques provient d'amour la mort.*

Love in Latin means *amor*,  
And so: what loves is mortal.



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**I**t was Sunday morning, and like every other morning I had awakened at seven twenty. Not seven fifteen, not seven thirty: seven twenty.

Somewhere inside me, in my head or heart or eyes, something clicks, reviving me at precisely the same time each day. The time I was born, presumably. I have often questioned my mother about this and received only vague replies.

My mother gave birth to a great many children, most of whom did not survive, fortunately, and I believe she tends to muddle her memories of childbearing. According to my astrologic calculations, she seems to be confusing my birth with that of a premature baby girl named Blanche or Blandine, whose place in the sun I still think I preempted.

I often wonder about this sister I never had. Where did she go, scorning life, scorning the earth, dead before she was even born? I feel that I owe her a good deal, that I resemble her, as if she had set aside for me before departing a speck of folly or wisdom in that maternal recess which formed me after her. A secret message, indecipherable, urgent, which I shall go on pondering forever. Where did she go? And will I ever find her? When I too return to dust, drifting in the wind, far, far away, weightless as star dust . . .

Motionless, flat on my back in bed, eyes wide open, I

gazed long and dreamily that morning at the massive oak beams in the ceiling. In the dawn's light just starting to filter through the red sailcloth curtains, in the silence of the sleeping house, I never tire of examining the landscapes formed by burrs sprouted in the heartwood, and the ridges, crevices, and frost-clefts that defined the outer fringes of the sapwood. I discover uncharted archipelagos, unfamiliar shell formations, alarming noctuids. One of them has the endearing shape of a nearly nubile pubis; another, the capricious contours of an ear.

The fire had died during the night, yet the odor of charred logs still filled the room.

I have lived in the country now for almost fifteen years, in this isolated old house nestled among trees bordering the River Flanne, a hundred and fifty miles or so from Paris.

The house is neither large nor handsome; it's a real house though, and I like living in it. Tucked away behind a huge estate, it must have served as a gatekeeper's lodge. A century ago, in the park where now only stately trees grow, there used to be what country people usually call a chateau and which was indeed the country house of a rich Polish banker. He never came there. Finding it too damp and drafty, he had his chateau torn down, they say, and hauled away stone by stone to some milder climate. He ignored the gatekeeper's lodge, which remained untenanted for fifty years.

The mother of my son inherited it sight unseen from somebody's defunct stepfather. We had come there one

Sunday in the fall to play at Robinson Crusoe and pick apples. We cooked them with rum and sugar in a copper pan over logs that we lit at dusk. The whole house filled with the fragrance of warm fruit.

A spell seemed to be operating. I knew in an instant that my life was about to change and I would never leave this place.

At the time, I was working, so to speak, for a Paris publisher. I had a large office, several young secretaries, several telephones. I spent my days performing meaningless chores, collecting a monthly salary that was costing me a fortune. I felt my life wasting away.

“Be a sweetheart,” I said suddenly to Christiane. “Telephone my office tomorrow morning. Say I’ve gone away, say I’m ill, say whatever you like. I want to stay here and live.”

Christiane returned to Paris alone. We had agreed some time before to break up what she jokingly called “our interesting relationship.” Here was the ideal occasion. She left me a good-by present, the oversize key to her country place. Every day for the past fourteen years I bless her for doing so.

She plunged back into the social stream. I, on the other hand, remained the useless custodian of a neglected park and a vanished chateau. It suits me. On and off in my spare time, I happen to have written books.

They stand side by side today, before my eyes, on the

mantelshelf. A copy of each title and edition, with translations into various foreign languages. They make quite an impressive display, all in a row.

When I was a young man and traveled a good deal, I never went anywhere without packing my complete works: a black notebook containing a hundred twenty-one pages and weighing five pounds. Today it would take a small trunk to hold all my books. That's why I no longer travel.

When I feel blue, I take a measuring tape and measure the length of my shelf. When I feel desperate, I count the total number of pages, divide by my age, and assign arbitrary coefficients. I draw comparisons to Tolstoy. I come out with heart-breaking results.

Above my writing table, pinned to the main wall beam, is a picture of a little white clown that I clipped from the *Nouvel Observateur*, with the caption: "Forty-year-olds who persist in writing are a pain."

I no longer write.

The birds of morning filled the trees with their clamor. They seemed bent on making the place uninhabitable. The robins usually begin, joined by bullfinches, jays, and titmice. Also nightingales, which sing principally in the daytime, despite what Shakespeare said, and rarely at night. But not in trees: in bushes, on tufts of grass, close to the ground.

Above my bed, wedged between the ridge of the roof and the mansard partition, lies a tiny false attic with no visible opening. A few clever animals have managed to slip

in and nest there. Long familiarity has taught me to distinguish the frantic scratching of field mice from the muted rustling of bats.

When I wake up early, I also like to imagine my weekend guests asleep in their rooms: Jean-Pierre and Cécile, or Mourad and Djanina upstairs, directly above me, close friends who visit often; and my son Fabien in the attic, escaping his studies in Paris now and then for a breath of country air, returning to the woods and river boats of his boyhood.

I love most of all the feeling—deep, tender—of Michèle next to me in the big red bed.

Almost every week for the past few years she has come down to join me on Friday evenings. Resolutely, she boards the seven-fifteen at Montparnasse; I pick her up at the Viormes station. For three days, with her laughter, her moodiness, her impudence, she brightens my solitude. And enchants my nights.

We get along well, having arrived at a more or less undefined yet solid relationship based on secret affection, openness, and humor. A kind of marriage void of contract or concessions, freely endorsed and renewable daily.

Nothing moves me so much as the strange relaxation of her face as it sinks backward into sleep. Michèle is a fascinating sleeper. I can spend hours studying her childlike Oriental features, caressing her cheeks and temples with one finger-tip, observing the faint twitches of her jaw, the sudden quivering of her eyelids, the slow aquatic impulses that

occasionally heave her to and fro. She is part of my intimate landscape. I like to recite in low whispers, as if reaching into her dreams, odd verses of Cocteau's *Plain-Chant*:

I shall die, you will live, and that keeps me awake:  
 Is there another fear?  
 Someday shall I no longer recognize, by ear,  
 The sound your breath and your heart make?

At that stage of my poetic incantation, my morning meditations, I heard the drone of a motor and gravel crunching on the driveway.

"A car at this hour?" I muttered.

Getting out of bed, I slipped on some clothes and went to the window. From the rattling pistons that "lag" on the downstroke, I had judged it to be a Frégate or an old "403." It was too early in the day for the car to have been a friend's.

Raising a curtain flap, I could make out through the windowpane a black commercial-type Peugeot pulled up in front of the house. I went outside and found my son Fabien already there.

"The police's here," he said. "They want to see you."

"The police *are* here," I replied mechanically, for I never miss a chance to promote good syntax. "Why are you up so early? Didn't you sleep well?"

Fabien shrugged off the question.

Sergeant Clairout and Officer Dauphin of the Viormes precinct were no strangers to me. Each time I lend my car to a girl friend, they invariably appear on my doorstep with



a citation for various offenses committed the length and breadth of France. And as I rarely venture outside the district, it always astonishes me to learn that on a certain Saturday in June I was “improperly parked” in Montélimar’s marketplace, or was speeding in Arras on a given night in November. With the indulgence of Viormes’ peace officers, I shoulder these problems cheerfully and pay the fines—my small contribution to the vacations of mistresses past and present.

That morning, the grim look on my gendarmes’ faces boded no good.

“Excuse us for disturbing you, Monsieur Pons,” they said, casually touching their caps. “We took the liberty of coming over. We’d like to . . . But here, read it yourself. An anonymous note reached us this morning.”

“Anonymous!” I repeated incredulously, pushing away with manifest indignation the paper they were handing me. “And did *you* read it?”

“Of course we did. Read it for yourself. It will interest you.”

My friends will vouch for the fact that I am very firm about principles but very flexible in applying them. Stifling my indignation, I concentrated on deciphering the few lines of clumsy writing produced by a ball-point pen on squared paper folded in quarters. The penmanship, spelling, and grammar all served to reinforce my theory of endemic illiteracy in France. I maintain that 94.2 percent of the population over the age of fourteen cannot effectively read or write.

The alarming tone of the message suddenly seemed to justify this early visit by the police.

GO SEE WHATS IN THE WATTER OFF THE  
ILE OF GRIN, THE SHORE FASING JOUFF. ITS  
YOUR KIND OF BUSINESS.

The signature, if one could call it that, read: SOME-  
ONE THAT DONT LIKE PUBLISSITY.

Below Viormes the Flanne carves sandy terrain into an archipelago of uninhabited, thickly wooded islands. A few of them, cleared and seeded early in the last century, have become pasturage. Every spring, herds are ferried there from the river towns in barges that anchor at the water's edge until late fall. The "Grain Island" is named for its old mill, now a sprawl of rubble between two islands and overrun with brushwood. A few blocks of white stone, a few decaying timbers still rise above the mud. Floods erode the riverbanks each winter and uprooted trees lie upon the water.

This tangle of dead branches acts as a strainer for oil slicks and all the litter flowing down the river below the canal locks. Colonies of coypus thrive in these waters.

"Suppose we take your boat and go have a look," Sergeant Clairout suggested, sticking the message in his notebook and snapping the elastic band.

Fabien had already run down to the landing. He had untied the flat-bottom white boat and was steadying it with a chain against the narrow stairway. After putting us aboard, the two policemen in the stern, myself in front, he jumped in and took the oars. The boat pitched sharply under our weight as waves slapped against the dock pilings.

"What's going on?" Fabien had whispered as I passed in front of him.

"We'll find out shortly," I answered, frowning enigmatically. Actually, I hadn't the faintest idea.

We rowed in silence. Cloudless sky, a faint mist on the river. The sun's early light skimmed the tips of tall poplars, whose gold leaves swayed in the wind. Willows undulated gentle along the shore. Here and there, gallinules dove beneath the water at our approach.

We had pushed off downstream. After rounding the first circular island and heading upstream, we began crossing the archipelago.

I watched Fabien rowing vigorously, his back to me. Long blond hair fell in ringlets about his shoulders. At each stroke his elbows thrust backward, biceps swelling beneath the short-sleeved tee shirt, legs stretching and stiffening under the strain: a superb mechanism nineteen years of age. Surely the most successful and rewarding of all my labors.

Beyond him, facing me, were the two gendarmes with their caps off. They sat silently, legs apart, hands on their knees, like Sunday's model children on park benches. Sergeant Clairout reached into his tunic pocket for his tobacco pouch and began rolling a cigarette.

Suddenly, below the Grain Island, in brushing against a submerged stump hidden among the reeds, we flushed a covey of ducks into frantic flight. Directly in front of us, lined up one behind the other, one, two, three, four splendid birds, trailed by several ducklings, rose out of the water with a great flapping of wings. Heads outstretched, necks

straining, feet securely retracted. In no time they disappeared beyond the adjoining bank, leaving long triangular striations on the river's placid face.

"Christ!" exclaimed Officer Dauphin, who had jumped to his feet, rocking the boat. "If only I'd brought my gun! Bam, bam, bam!"

Cocking one eye and shouldering an imaginary rifle, he fired off a volley of abuse at the birds. His gymnastics proved a hazard to navigation, and Fabien asked him politely but firmly to sit down.

I turned to the front of the boat. As we headed upstream parallel to the Grain Island, I began studying the banks somewhat apprehensively. I tried to visualize the kind of discovery we were apt to make so early in the morning in this semi-stagnant inlet where fishermen rarely venture, and the fish, asphyxiated, usually float belly upward.

Once we had rounded the tip of the island, I noticed two men in a stationary boat near the ruins of the old mill. The layer of litter was so dense, so tightly compacted, that the boat seemed moored in the midst of a public dump.

"Here's Quérolles," the sergeant announced. Turning to me, he explained, "I put in a call for Quérolles on the way over to you. He can give us a hand."

Quérolles, also known to the townspeople as Monsieur Max, manages the local tavern and its tobacco concession, as well as the public telephone in Jouff. He knows me well, for he rides over on his bicycle with phone messages from friends who have given up trying to reach my number on the eve of a film preview or some unscheduled festival—that

of May 1968, for example, when no one knew my whereabouts and Quérolles came four times a day to tuck messages under my door.

He owns two or three dories and rents them out to transient fishermen. He also raises sheep, and every June, year after year, I see him crossing the river with a lamb cradled in his arms, which he installs for a few weeks in the front room of his tavern. I am most impressed by the fact that every year he looks more and more like his ram: the narrow forehead and fuzzy hair, the serene gaze of a rustic St. John the Baptist.

I recognized his friend Rendu next to him in the boat. Rendu is an old peasant with cunning eyes set in a bulldog face. He is the local knacker, street sweeper, and distiller. He never goes anywhere without his sailor cap and, summer and winter alike, he wears a cloth tunic resembling a uniform, studded with pockets and buttons, which gives him the air of a retired customs officer. A handy, obliging person on whom everyone relies for performing odd jobs and somewhat delicate chores.

The two men were kneeling in the prow, leaning, not so much over the water as over the thick viscous surface of the river. Hearing us arrive, they stood up and Quérolles cupped his hands to his mouth, shouting triumphantly, jubilantly, "We've got him! What a catch!"

Fabien guided the boat slowly into the island's offshore crosscurrents. The prow sliced through pools of refuse, collections of organic matter and rotting waste, straw, corks, rags, waterlogged cartons, slimy plastic containers, with

dead birds and fish floating all around. Glutinous muck saturated with oil congealed the quivering mass. Aquatic mosses bloomed on this foul carpet crawling with insects, larvae, and giant flies.

The corpse lay on its back in the water, head flopping backward, arms limp, knees bent slightly above the surface. It had found its niche, seated, like an infant in its tub.

The body belonged to a fortyish man in a fairly advanced state of decomposition, somewhere between cadaver and skeleton. Coypus along the shore, and probably crows, must have picked it over already. The eyes, choice morsels, were the first to go. The skull, more or less stripped clean, displayed vacant white sockets. The gaping mouth had neither tongue nor gums. A few straggling shreds of ashen flesh still clung to the maxilla and cheekbones. The tattered clothing macerated in a cesspool. The man wore a black, nubby wool suit and nylon shirt, with the tie still knotted. His exposed thoracic cavity and burst abdomen were spilling out in a tangle of organs and putrid viscera. The legs and feet, sheathed in oxfords, seemed in better condition.

“What’s the program, chief?” Rendu asked the sergeant facetiously. “Do we give him the mouth-to-mouth?”

Quérolles was now busy trying to hook the body by the waist with a small grapple, but the trousers tore at once under the strain. The joints unhinged, the flesh peeled off in shreds.

“That way won’t be nothing left, you jerk!” Rendu cautioned his friend Max. “Let me do it.”

The street sweeper had not overlooked the fact that the dead man's synthetic tie had resisted decay. Looped around the cervical vertebra—because the neck was practically gone—it might act as a sling, provided the spinal column held together. Reaching into the pocket of his uniform, he took out a ball of heavy twine and attached one end to the tip of a tie flap.

While Quérolles resumed his rowing, Rendu instructed Fabien to channel his way slowly among the debris and branches. The two boats returned in single file through the inlet and rounded the island. Kneeling in the stern, the street cleaner was gently towing the body like a whaler delivering his catch to port.

“Sure you don't mind my using your boat, Monsieur Pons?” the sergeant asked me once again.

Why should I mind? Discovering a body gave him an impressive air of authority. Taking out his freshly rolled cigarette, he lit it and smoked in silence.

The sun had risen above the treetops, inundating the shores with light. There was a sense of serene radiance pervading the landscape, something deeply satisfying about the exuberant vegetation. Scattered along the grassy banks, clumps of broom and flowering locust formed brilliant patches of yellow against the gamut of greens.

How satisfying it was to watch new pads burgeoning, expanding every day, on the water lilies I had collected last fall from the mud flats around Vatable where they thrive. I had replanted them with unwonted carelessness in the mud bordering my own meadow; to my great surprise some took

root. The stems and pads proliferated and flourished among the rhizomes. With luck, flowers would appear in a few weeks.

“Watch out for the lilies!” I warned Fabien as we reached the dock.

He delivered us safely and I sprang onto the platform. I hauled the boat to the edge of the float, leaving a berth for Max, who still trailed behind us towing his macabre dinghy.

Clairout had taken charge. From the foot of the stairs, he veered Quérolles’ oncoming boat with the tip of his boot, grasping the cord that Rendu held out.

The body was partly submerged. It must have leaked some entrails on its journey as it appeared to be sinking slowly. Only the jaws and nasal bone rose above the water, pointing skyward, as well as the upper thorax in its jacket braced by the necktie. The knees also of course, forming two black islets the size of lily pads floating on the surface, drifting apart and together again in the ripples.

The sergeant wrapped the cord around a bitt on the landing. Rendu, now ashore, offered further advice. “He’ll sink. Better tie his feet.”

Kneeling on the dock, he took a second ball of cord from his pocket, made a slip knot and hitched it around the drowned man’s ankles to raise the body and keep it afloat. The pair of oxfords reappeared, revealing at the same time, between the rolled-down socks and trouser cuffs, a large patch of snow-white skin seemingly firm and intact. The knees remained bent during this operation, but the pelvis



had caved in slightly: a viscous, soupy glob glided off with the current while a nest of fat white worms, bent on survival, began inching their way back up toward the thoracic cage.

“Can’t you manage to get him out of there?” Clairout asked the street sweeper as he secured the cord to a second bollard. Rendu didn’t bother to reply. The gendarme asked if he could use my telephone to call the Viormes fire department.

“A requisition, you understand.” He went on to explain: “The flood squad, I mean. They have the right equipment. I can’t keep him here all day, especially on a Sunday.”

He spoke without moving a muscle, glued to the wooden stairs at the water’s edge. He kept staring at the body, apparently lost in his own very private thoughts. We stood silently behind him, fascinated yet embarrassed to show it.

Had the victim been a dog, a sheep, even a lamb, we would have surrendered it long since to the current, letting it drift off or be claimed by one of the adjacent canal locks. But here before us, despite his piteous condition, was a fellow human being, a citizen of our Republic, in all likelihood, registered with the social security bureau, the board of elections, and maybe even in the ranks of the civil service. This raised questions wholly irrelevant to the disposal of animal carcasses or the removal of household sewage. The sergeant looked a trifle puzzled. “See what you can find on him,” he instructed Rendu. “I’ll go telephone.”

I went with Clairout to make his call. On the way up

to the house I met Jean-Pierre and Cécile, lured out of bed by the arrival of the police and the activity on the river.

“What’s going on?” Cécile inquired.

“Go down to the landing. I warn you though, it’s not pretty.”

I could imagine Cécile’s face when she saw the body. On warm summer Sundays, in that flowered Tahitian skirt of hers, with bare midriff and hair loose, she is always ready for a “quick pop” into the river. “Pollution, my ass!” is the motto she trumpets, arching her chest and slapping her thighs. Polio is beneath her contempt.

I presume Annette felt the same way. She’s the florist here in Viormes, and was once no less attractive, no less healthy than Cécile. I run into her now and then at the grade crossing, pale and immobile in her long aluminum stretcher.

My telephone is in the kitchen. It’s an old machine with a wooden box and a magnetic crank. It works no better or worse than the computerized digital ones I am apt to admire when calling on my publishers in Paris, for example. But here we benefit from not being hooked into the automatic service because it generates pleasant conversations with the switchboard operators. “Say, you ninny, there’s no more ‘Babylone’; now it’s 222. You should have learned that from when you used to call your chick on ‘Babylone.’”

That morning I didn’t feel up to dealing with Brigitte or Véronique or Stéphanie. I cranked the handle and passed the receiver to the sergeant.

There was hot coffee on the stove, cups and milk, bread and butter on the table. A thoughtful touch on the part of

Fabien, who is not overly communicative and chooses this way to say he really enjoys spending Sundays with me. Also his way of replacing a mother who, camera in hand, has been tramping the revolutionary trails of Portugese Guinea for several months.

While Clairout was talking to his friend on the flood squad, I had poured two cups of coffee, which we drank facing each other. From the tone of his voice, his halting speech, the peculiar look on his face while he phoned, I sensed in my gendarme an anxiety far beyond the call of duty.

"I'm sure I know that man," he said at last, without looking at me, between gulps of coffee.

I had the same nagging doubts, had had them from the moment I set eyes on the body. Only then did I dare to voice them.

"It could be Aurélien," I ventured. "Do you remember Aurélien?"

No one in these parts could forget Aurélien. A marvelous fellow, tall, slender, proud, with a mane of hair and sparkling eyes. Intelligent and capable, he could do anything with his hands. But he refused to work—except for pleasure. "I won't surrender," he used to say. "They won't get me." Once in a while he would bring me a heaping basket of morels, which are altogether rare in this region. "Morels are not mushrooms," he informed me with an air of mystery. "They are morels. It's not the same thing."

He would disappear for weeks, months, then suddenly reappear without warning. One morning his wife marched

straight out of the house and went to live in Oklahoma with a daughter who had married an American soldier.

I had promised Aurélien to drive her to Orly airport. It was her first venture outside the town.

“Would you like to see Paris on the way?” I asked her.

“No, no, don’t bother. What would I do in Paris?”

At Orly, she had refused to ride the escalator. It looked unsafe. But she was all smiles trotting aboard the Pan Am Boeing.

In a fit of rage after she left, Aurélien smashed everything in the house. A steady drinker to begin with, now he drank even more. Inside a few years he became an alcoholic—and a tramp. The police would pick him out of ditches, crawling on all fours. “I won’t surrender,” he used to say. Several short sessions behind bars preceded several long ones in the hospital. He escaped from the hospital. Haggard, wan, reeling, he came to see me.

“Come on, Monsieur Pons, won’t you take me back to the police? It’s really nice there; the trouble is they won’t keep me.”

Then he disappeared from the neighborhood, and that Sunday, when I saw the body in the water . . .

“No,” Clairout declared at last, “I don’t think it’s Aurélien. He was too smart. He would have covered his trail.”

The sergeant set down his cup and the two of us walked back to the landing.

Quérolles and Rendu, both with rolled-up sleeves and

both kneeling, one on the dock, the other in the boat, had begun searching the body. Cécile was buried in Jean-Pierre's arms, her face snuggled against his neck to blot out the scene. Off to one side, Fabien was talking quietly with Officer Dauphin.

Out of the dead man's jacket the two searchers already had produced a comb, a pair of glasses, a bunch of keys, and a collection of pens and pencils which they spread out fan-like on the steps. The display included one of those fat metal ejector pens with four different colored tips, mounted on spring shafts, which compress and eject each other one at a time. An odious device that the Ministry of Cultural Affairs long since ought to have declared a public nuisance.

"He did a lot of writing, that man," Monsieur Max reflected, looking at me. "Could he possibly be a friend of yours?"

With one arm under the dead man's buttocks, or what remained of them, Rendu now was groping for the trouser pockets. After a while, which seemed like hours, he managed to grab a rear one and proudly handed the sergeant a wad of soggy cloth presumably containing a wallet.

This operation had rocked the dead man's shoulders, sending a hand floating up to the surface. A skeleton's hand, fleshless: first, second and third phalanges arrayed as if for an anatomy lesson. Encircling the ring finger, a gold band; blocked by the bleached bones of the carpus, a watch on its metal wristband.

"Try to fish up his jewelry," said the second gendarme. "It's the least we can do for his widow."

Rendu deftly unfastened the watchband and slipped it over the fingers, but refused to remove the ring. "Makes no difference to me," he explained, "but it'll mess things up."

They let it go at that, and I invited everyone into the kitchen for a drink while we waited for the firemen to arrive. Quérolles and Rendu asked for some bleach to clean off their hands. Fabien brought out glasses and a pitcher of red wine.

Sergeant Clairout placed the dead man's wallet on newspapers spread out before him on the table, opening it like a book, fingering it gingerly. The leather had survived its bath rather well on the whole. And defied the rats, too. He extracted from various pockets first some papers reduced to a blob of paste, then a driver's license, which must have been sealed in plastic, each stub in its own watertight case, for it looked as good as new.

We were forming a circle around the sergeant when, suddenly, there on the kitchen table appeared a photograph of the person whose wreckage we had just salvaged. Without prompting, all of us observed a minute of silence. Yes, of grief.

It showed a man in his forties, round-faced, with a sober, mournful expression and graying black hair slicked down and swept back diagonally. Just an ordinary citizen, the kind you run into by the dozen every day in railway stations, post offices, or country taverns. Fernand Maugendre was his name, a native of Jouff residing in neighboring Vaudeville.

With his conventional jacket, nylon shirt and necktie,

he might have been doomed forever to wear the uniform of urban mediocrity. But his life had dissolved at the river's edge, and behind the picture of this plump face all of us could project, as if with X-rays, the otherwise fascinating image of a fleshless head, a white skull with hollow sockets.

"What a pity to end up like this," Clairout said at last. "For what? And such a decent man besides . . ."

This driver's license issued by the police department would serve to identify the victim. That was all the gendarme wanted. He seemed doubly satisfied, convinced that the document bore out the theory of suicide he had already enunciated as fact.

Michèle, also out of bed by now, did not agree. She reminded him sternly how simple it would be to shove any old billfold into a dead man's pockets before dumping him overboard. A murderer thus could substitute for his victim and cover his traces. Unless the police are really determined to . . .

"You read too many detective stories, little lady," the sergeant interjected softly. "In Paris, there'd be an autopsy no doubt, and the whole works. But that costs a lot, you know. An autopsy alone comes to about 700 francs. We don't have that kind of money here in the country."

We were still waiting for the firemen, who apparently saw no need to rush on account of a dead man. Breakfast was turning into a picnic. Distress could not dwarf our appetites, and the conversation, which kept drifting back to the drowned man, was far from funereal.

"I still have to call a doctor," the sergeant finally an-

nounced. My surprise and the ensuing spatter of jokes prompted further elaboration. "What else am I to do? A doctor has to certify his death. I can't do it."

He went to the telephone and, just before lifting the receiver, turned to us, declaring solemnly, "Things often don't turn out to be the way they look."

I would strongly advise against getting sick on a Sunday morning in this part of the country. Of Viormes' two doctors, one was off skiing, the other golfing. We had to call the police station in a neighboring town for the name of the physician on weekend duty. But the latter's secretary quite rightly pointed out that no doctor on call was free to leave the office. Not even on requisition. Not even to certify a death.

The sergeant finally located through sheer persistence, at an inn catering to Parisians, a hospital intern with nothing more pressing on his agenda than a romp in the hay with a girl friend and who promised to drop by later in the morning.

Quérolles and Rendu downed one more glass of wine and left. I walked them back to the landing where the body, anchored like a skiff, continued to list. In our absence, a school of roach, attracted by the miraculous bait, had begun nibbling at the moist flesh in search of worms. They had come in droves, wriggling about. Rendu clubbed several with an oar.

"Come by and visit me some evening," Monsieur Max said before climbing into his boat. "There's a lot I can tell you about the man, if you're interested."

I lingered a moment watching the two men lazily mak-



ing their way upstream on the tranquil Flanne. Soon they disappeared behind the foliage along the shore. I could already hear them telling their tale to customers at the tavern in Jouff over the lunchtime apéritif. By noon the whole town would know about the macabre discovery. How tongues would wag. Murder? Accident? Suicide? There'd be no end to the gossip about this carcass with a hollow skull bobbing gently in the water right at my feet, among the lily pads.

The growl of a motor and jolting of a vehicle over wheel ruts snatched me from my reverie: the firemen came plunging down the gravel driveway to a halt in front of the house.

A full squad arrived, six men in boots and helmets with hatchets belted on, some in leather firefighting outfits, others in wet suits. All were crammed into a bright red jeep hauling a trailer on which sat a rubber lifeboat inflated for service. They leapt to the ground and stood about laughing and talking.

The two gendarmes had appeared on the doorstep in their caps. The salvage operation was opening like a carnival in CinemaScope; any minute I expected someone to shout: "Silence! Let'em roll! We're filming!"

Without pause, as if it were daily routine, the firefighters hauled out from the lifeboat a roll of rubberized canvas edged with eyelets and stout laces. They uncoiled it on the ground and set off at a run toward the riverbank, dragging it behind them. While one man cut the cords attaching the body, two others in wet suits waded out midway to their thighs. In no time the mangled cadaver was enveloped in

the sheet, handed out of the water, and dragged up onto level ground. They left it resting in the sun on the driveway next to the red jeep.

The carcass had survived its journey without loss of limb; the head still clung to the vertebrae. Before long, however, the stench within a radius of ten yards became unbearable. A fireman threw an old blanket over the body and everyone fled into the kitchen, slamming doors and windows.

Cheese, sausage, more wine, the picnic resumed. Lunch-time was nearing, and Cécile put the lamb roast in the oven.

“Lord, I wouldn’t eat meat today if you paid me!” a young fireman volunteered.

At one corner of the table Sergeant Clairout had begun writing his report. The objects removed from the corpse were spread before him as he copied out slowly and laboriously the information on the dead man’s driving permit.

“You really don’t know this man?” he asked suddenly, handing me once again the police red book open to the victim’s photograph. “You’ve never seen him?”

His insistence conveyed not so much suspicion as a trace of disbelief.

“No, I really can’t place him at all,” I replied after a momentary effort to recall memories and faces. “What did he do for a living?”

“Insurance salesman. With La Foncière, I think. Though for some time he wasn’t doing much of anything. Didn’t show up for work, ran off without notice. His mother got in touch with us. Poor woman had heart trouble

herself. Wait till we have to break the news to her.”

The young intern arrived in a suede windbreaker and a sports car. It was after one o'clock. The sergeant took him over to the body and lifted the blanket for a second. The two men then returned to the kitchen and signed some papers, while the firemen, anxious to wind things up, loaded the body hastily into the rubber boat and sped off to the morgue in the municipal hospital.

“How long would you say he was dead?” the gendarme asked the doctor.

“Three weeks to a month, roughly. That suit you?”

“Just what I thought.”

They shook hands and the intern got back into his car. His girl friend had never left it. The only thing for me to do was escort the two gendarmes to their patrol van. Jean-Pierre and Cécile already had begun clearing the table and washing glasses. Just enough time to make a salad before the lamb was cooked.

Clairout seemed to be killing time, walking round in circles, undecided whether or not to leave. Finally, he took me aside in the doorway. “I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea,” he said. “We're not tossing out guesses. Here in the country, you know, nobody is a stranger. It's a clear case of suicide. Anyway, the man was seen visiting her. You know, Mademoiselle B. who lives near the dike. And he isn't the only one. You mentioned Aurélien . . .”

With that, we shook hands and he climbed into the car with his partner. “Thanks again for the snack. And don't worry about the phone call: it's official business.”

On Monday mornings I drive Michèle to the Viormes station where she is supposed to catch the train for Paris. That would be simple enough if I could drag her out of bed at a decent hour. I've tried everything: alarm clocks, the radio, the telephone, coffee, kisses, slaps, caresses, tickles. Nothing works. I've given up. By the time we reach the grade crossing the barriers are down, the train lurching off. All I can do is circle the station's flooded roadway, ploughing through water up to the hub at times, and head for Paris.

Michèle laughs and twits me in my one sensitive spot. "You wait and see, we'll beat the train to Paris."

Now I don't like to compete with trains. Not because I can't outrace them but because they enjoy outrageous favor with the public agencies. At every crossing up and down the line, they have priority. And they abuse it.

Yet I love nothing more than those early morning departures with Michèle, and the visceral exaltation of streaking along the highway. Even when it's raining we keep the top down; the secret is to dash between the raindrops. Bedraggled and shivering, we enter Paris via an underpass known only to me, which avoids the outer boulevards. Michèle hops into a taxi and I turn the car around. On the way home, I pick up bread in Voirol from a bakery that

stays open on Mondays. I'm back in time for breakfast. Madame Fijutte, my housekeeper, is there grumbling as she tidies up after the weekend. "Look at that, you've found some bread!" she comments ritually.

She has never been able to understand how I manage to buy a loaf of bread on a Monday morning. It doesn't occur to her that while she is straightening up the kitchen, I, racing back and forth at ninety miles an hour, have covered a quarter of the map of France.

Some day I must write about the eccentric speculations that fill my mind as I drive along the highway. After all, Descartes meditated next to his stove. In my case, it's only at the wheel of my car, stimulated by rattling pistons and the rumbling camshaft, that I feel my intellect and imagination functioning most harmoniously. In this sense, the car is indeed a tool of my profession. Some day I'm going to tell the insurance company that. With my foot on the gas and my hand on the gearshift, I dash off reports, evaluate situations, spin out dreams. I also know it is how I shall die, some winter morning, in a fit of blinding madness.

The car I'll be driving then, will have a defective tie rod on the right front wheel suspension. A flaw in the metal. Racing along an icy road, I'll hit a marker buried in snow. The bar will collapse. The car will spin wildly, bounce off an earthen embankment into the opposite lane and smash against a railway parapet. The violent impact will wedge the steering wheel between my hands. I'll be catapulted through the windshield against the barrier and

fall lifeless on my back in the snow. A white train will pass, whistling into the frosty air.

They'll find my body mangled and bleeding, the face mutilated beyond recognition—that's the final image I'll leave behind me on earth. Witnesses, ambulance drivers, and the police will simply say, on arriving home: it was ghastly.

On returning to Viormes that day, having banished the imagery and echoing laughter of the trip with Michèle, I found my thoughts persistently drifting back to the macabre discovery we had made in the river the day before.

It had become the pivotal event of that beautiful Sunday. In the afternoon, we lay on blankets in the grass listening to Jean-Pierre read his latest film scenario, which involved us in a lengthy debate lasting through dinner. We played bridge in the evening, and Michèle, flaunting all the rules, pulled off her six heart bid doubled and redoubled, which climaxed the game. Though the drowned man was certainly in our thoughts, we avoided the subject. What was there to say, after all? Death, we know, is in the order of things.

The attitude of the two policemen was more interesting though, and seemed to warrant further examination. I was bothered not so much by their interpretation as by their certainty, their blithe acceptance of an alarming event. Even if the man had willfully chosen to die and rot in the river, his motives for doing so merited some sort of investigation. Yet Clairout's sole argument was that for a long time the victim had been calling on a maiden lady in town. That

fact somehow revealed to him a glaring manifestation of cause and effect. It made the whole business seem odd and gave me further cause for reflection.

Mademoiselle B. is not a total stranger to me.

On those long, level stretches of highway, I tried to recall as accurately as possible the peculiar circumstances of our first meeting.

It was shortly after I settled in Jouff, before I got to know anyone there. One winter evening, on my way home from some errands in a neighboring town, I witnessed a traffic accident. On the last turn, just past the bridge over the Flanne at the entrance to Jouff, a woman, who must have been pushing a bicycle and a baby carriage simultaneously along the street, was hit and knocked down by a truck. The bicycle was crushed, the carriage sent hurtling into a wall. The baby, for some reason, escaped hurt. As for the mother, I arrived as they were lifting her into an ambulance. Though bruised and bleeding, she didn't seem vitally injured.

When the ambulance, the police, and the last curious bystanders had gone, I noticed a little girl of twelve or thirteen standing on the corner, sniffing and shivering from the cold, looking utterly bewildered. I went up to her and asked, "What's the matter? What are you doing here?"

At first she didn't answer. She sulked, and went on sobbing and shaking. Then, snuffling once or twice, she announced defiantly, "It's my mother. My baby brother. They've been run over."

I hastened to comfort her on this score and made her

promise to go straight home. I offered to drive her, though the thought of whom she might be going home to made me uneasy. A sister? Grandmother? Father?

“That pig of a father?” she cut in savagely. “No chance of *him* being there.”

“Why’s that? He gets home late from work?”

“He never works. He’s with that woman. You know what I mean, with that tart.”

I took the child into my car and, while we were driving, it occurred to me that the first thing to do was find her father, tell him about the accident and get him to come home.

“Do you know where this woman lives?”

“Everybody knows. Over there, behind the dike.”

What people here inaccurately call “the dike” is in fact the old rail line that connected Viormes and Montbrezon before the war. It runs on both sides of the Flanne, extending the procession of white stone pilings driven into the river bed, each of which resembles a tiny fort invaded by weeds. They are all that remains of the bridge destroyed in 1940 by the retreating French army. On our side, the basalt embankment advances through woods and moors. The rails themselves were reclaimed ages ago, but ties, bolts, and even fishplates still turn up. The railroad must have been designed to include several shunt lines, for here and there you can see traces of a branch track. Dotted the landscape mile after mile are small houses originally built for the gatekeepers and subsequently converted to civilian use



after the line was abandoned and replaced by bus service. Mademoiselle B. lives in one of those houses.

When I arrived at her place on that rainy November evening, guided by my sniffing little companion, I was struck by the wild, forbidding landscape. Gusts of wind swayed the bare birches, bending the slender ferns and broom almost to the ground. Rain drummed steadily on the car roof. The wailing windshield wipers chanted softly in the night.

"It's over there," the girl directed, as we approached the end of a lane through muddy pools and rain-sodden ruts. "I don't want to go in."

The house rose tall and straight, its three blind faces coated with moldering plaster and flecked with copper and rust. It might have been a silo under the bluish-gray slate roof. In front were three rectangular windows behind hinged iron shutters, shut tight now, like the narrow gate leading into a kind of gravel turnaround cluttered with stacks of crates enclosed in wire netting. In the headlights' glare they looked like rabbit hutches. I noticed a man's bicycle leaning against the wall in the rain.

"Well, *I'm* going in," I announced, opening the door and setting the hand brake, but leaving on the lights and motor. "What's your name?"

"Martine."

She was curled up on the seat with one leg tucked under her. In the darkness lit only by the dashboard, her knees resembled two pale rosy cockleshells, all too distracting.

“Martine what? What’s your father’s name?”

“Martial Revon. Don’t go.”

I went. There was no fence or railing around the house. I marched boldly up to the French door, the upper pane of which had its blinds drawn. As I approached, I could see light filtering faintly through the slits. No bell, no knocker. I hammered my fist on the metal door panel, which clanged resonantly.

Silence. I paused to listen to the rain spilling off the slate roof into the gutters, then knocked again, shouting, “Monsieur Revon! Monsieur Revon!”

In a moment I heard footsteps and doors opening inside. Then a large electric lantern shielded by a metal cage and a kind of enamel base, such as you still find today in rural railway stations, lit up above my head. Simultaneously a woman’s voice, called out, a little throaty but curiously soft at the same time, “What is it? What do you want?”

“I’m looking for Monsieur Revon. Is he there? He’s needed at home.”

I didn’t expect that door to open. I realized how awkward my mission was, trying to drag out of bed a poor fellow who was simply “doing his business” (as they say in the local idiom) with his girl friend. But I had decided to play the Good Samaritan and restore an errant father to the bosom of his family. And to prove it, I was prepared to deliver a stern lecture right there in the teeming rain, which had started to trickle off my cap, down the neck of my shirt, and underneath my sweater. To my surprise, the door opened softly.

Mademoiselle B. is not especially pretty. Nor is she especially young.

My first thought on seeing her pale, tired face in the doorway, I recall, was how hard it would be to guess her age. Her eyes, two narrow almond-shaped eyes as icy blue as a frozen pond; her thin smile—for she was smiling—reflected an astonishing youthfulness, but a youthfulness that was also ageless. Her hair fell in bangs almost to her brows, fanning out in fine downy wisps over cheeks and temples. It was pure white, but whether the whiteness derived from cosmetics or from congenital albinism was open to question. She resembled the classic image of some lifeless young maiden risen from the grave to wander among tombstones draped all in a flurry of tulle, gossamer, frills and ribbons, the many layers of which all but obliterate their transparency except for the barest outline (beneath what served as her blouse) of firm, ripening young breasts, like artichoke buds, perched at a dizzying altitude just below the base of her neck.

Extending a hand sheathed in a white lace glove, she said, still smiling, “Come in, sir. Don’t stand out in the rain.”

The words and mannerisms were not those of any villager, nor were the finery, the gloves, nor particularly the inflections of this oddly guttural voice which had a way of tossing out vowels between consonants like a series of little squeaks. The reception so surprised me that I stammered an apology, hastily explaining that an accident had occurred that urgently required Revon’s return home.

“Of course, of course,” the woman repeated. “Rest assured, he’ll come right away.”

That was my first meeting with Mademoiselle B. She shut the door and I dashed for the car. On the way back Martine, as if waking up suddenly, plied me with questions. “You saw her? Come on, did you really see her? What’s she like? What’d she say? How about my father?”

I dropped her off at the Alaouette farm, one of the largest in the district, at the entrance to town, and I must confess that I haven’t thought of her since. I ran across her once or twice afterwards at the grocer’s or on her way home from school. I noticed she had a new bicycle.

But on that particular morning years later, as I drove along recalling the evening of the accident, mostly because of its connection with that strange Mademoiselle B., I had a nagging desire to see Martine again.

I drove straight into the farmyard and honked twice. A pack of dogs greeted me, barking furiously as they surrounded the car. I stepped out cautiously, like Daniel into the lion’s den, expecting them to tear me apart.

Just then Martine came out of the barn balancing two large jugs at arm’s length.

In a few years she had doubled in size, and this gawky, untidy adolescent incased in flowered pants—yes, flowered!—hardly resembled the quick-witted youngster with cockle-shell knees I had recalled on the way over.

“Hello, Martine,” I ventured cordially. “Remember me? You know, the day of the accident . . .”

“Sure I remember you. I always see you going by. But

that's not the car you used to have. The other one was blue."

We were off on the wrong foot. I had no desire to retrace the ancestry of my automobile for this silly girl: the black begat the blue, which begat a second black one, which begat the red, which expired without heirs, and so on. Cutting the tale short, I asked to see her father—though I hadn't the slightest idea what I wanted to say to him. Instantly, her eyes bulged, her mouth dropped open, as if I had uttered the most outlandish request. After a pause, she stammered, "My father, my father . . . isn't here any more. You better talk to Mama."

The mother, whom I found in the farmhouse kitchen scrubbing baby linen over a tub, poured a savage tirade into my ears: no indeed, he certainly wasn't there or about to return, thank God; and if he took it into his head to come back she would throw him out the door and wanted nothing to do with that good-for-nothing drunkard who had sponged on her for years, because after all the farm was hers, inherited from her parents, that's right mister, and she was the one who did all the work, who always had done it, who even bought the tractor with her own money, not to mention the washing machine that's always breaking down and nobody comes to repair; and how many times had she ended up running the tractor while that husband of hers was out wenching, as everyone knew for miles around, that was all he was good for anyway, that and saddling her with a baby every year, it's the gospel truth mister, the minute that man tossed his pants on the bed she'd get pregnant, tied up in her belly for months, and at her age she'd had

enough of that sort of thing, and was in no mood ever to set up housekeeping again with him or anyone else, and he deserved what he got, as she said, if that other whore had driven him crazy, after he probably gave her a hard time, and sent him packing Lord knows where, but she didn't want to know and didn't give a damn, and that was all she was good for, that old maid, stealing other women's men since she couldn't hang onto one of her own, and besides I knew the whore personally because I'd driven over there with Martine the day of the accident, and that was another story, mister, and the insurance company still hadn't paid up, but sooner or later they'll pay because the law says they have to and after all it's only fair.

In her fury, the farmer's wife pounded the wash with her beater, punctuating each phrase with a vicious thud. Never again will those clothes take such a drubbing, I thought to myself. Now and again she would raise one sudsy hand to dab at a lock of hair, always the same one, which kept falling back onto her forehead.

Her ruddy face was flushed and bloated and about to burst, like a ripe tomato swollen with sunshine. Up to then I hadn't been able to get in a word. Now a pause allowed me to fire off the one question I was dying to ask. "But don't you find it very odd for a man to disappear like that, into thin air?"

Her sharp reply ended our conversation. "Mister, you'll find a lot of odd things going on around here."

I arrived home with my loaf of bread under one arm and went straight into the kitchen. The breakfast coffee

was waiting on the stove and my housekeeper in front of it.

“Look at that, you’ve found some bread!” she observed, neither more nor less surprised than on other Mondays. “I’ll have a piece with you since I haven’t eaten yet myself this morning.”

We sat down facing each other across the wooden table, prepared for one of our long weekly conferences.

When I first settled here and asked around for a housekeeper, I expected the public grapevine to produce some sharp-witted youngster, some farmgirl with broad hips and a nasal twang who would soon have me slaving away in the kitchen while she sprawled in my rocking chair reading movie magazines and flipping cigarette butts onto my parquet floor. Instead, Madame Fijutte appeared. Old, worn, and despondent, she sobbed out her litany of a dismal childhood and a cheerless existence laden with burials, illness, and privations: years of thankless toil in field and factory, of rising in the icy dawn, of peddling for miles on an ancient bicycle over snow-packed wintry roads. I was obliged to take note of every boil and cavity for which she was ever treated. “And with the cost of drugs what they are today!” she lamented. Her name, if nothing else about her, entranced me: “Fijutte” evokes to me the radiant image of a wee funambulist tripping across the skies of my childhood, and vacation motor trips in sunny Provence. Teary-eyed, I hired Madame Fijutte at once on the strength of her name. And for years she has fed me vile cream of this-or-that soup, boiled potatoes as shapeless as her own buttocks, limp and greasy steaks swimming in butter. Every morning, without omitting or adding a single detail, she recom-

mences the saga of her mournful existence. She presents me with daily bulletins on her boils and her menopause.

That morning, however, while filling the coffee cups with boiled sludge and curdled milk, she embarked immediately on the sole topic of local interest since the day before, which distracted her for once from her own medical and dental preoccupations. "Tell me, did you really fish up something queer yesterday?"

After we had philosophized briefly on life and death, I ventured to pursue my investigation. "This Mademoiselle B. he used to see . . . do you know her? They say . . ."

I saw Madame Fijutte's pale face grow paler, her thin lips grow thinner. Spitting a half-chewed mouthful of bread and butter into her coffee cup, she rose suddenly and, clamping me in a rigid, glassy stare, performed the Christian ritual of exorcism: with the five fingers of her right hand braced tightly together, she touched in turn her forehead, chest, and each side of her neck.

Never would I have guessed she was familiar with the secret rites of ancient cults. Her raw knuckles and cropped nails seemed designed instead to perform simple daily tasks like cleaning poultry, retrieving chunks of coal from the cinder trap under the stove, stuffing bills and coins into a drawstring change purse. I tried to imagine them fastening a garter, or picking at the bloody core of a boil. But this initiatory, tactile exploration of her future skeleton's every crevice . . .

"Never speak of that . . . thing . . . that hussy . . . that *creature*, Monsieur Maurice," she admonished me in a ghostly voice. "Never. It's bad luck."



With that, she turned her back and hunched her head between bowed shoulders. Snatching a scrub brush and bucket, she rushed from the kitchen. "I'll get the bathroom cleaned; that'll be one less thing to do."

The word "creature" has several meanings. To my housekeeper, judging from her horrified reaction, it did not suggest a woman of easy virtue living off the sale of her favors. A euphemism my mother would have cherished. No, Madame Fijutte would have said, quite naturally: a whore. If she used an uncommon word, so strange on her lips; if, in the very act of uttering the word, she had tried to disarm it, to efface it more or less by a cabalistic sign, it could only be because the word threatened her with a power both supernatural and, frankly, diabolical.

Still, we weren't at the movies, or on page 39 of a murder mystery; we were in the kitchen of an old French country house on an April morning in 1972, at the time when two American astronauts were prancing on the moon under the scrutiny of their own electronic camera. Madame Fijutte had watched them, as I had, on her television screen, like two kangaroos in a fish bowl. We had talked about it briefly, amazed but unexcited. "What won't they manage to do next!" suggests the indifference prompting our remarks. It alarmed me to consider that the cosmic feats of our era had less impact on the imagination than superstitious fears handed down for centuries. What strange power did this Mademoiselle B. possess over this whole district to elicit helpless denunciations from police, angry tirades from farm wives, and panic from my housekeeper?

**I**n the days ahead, I tried to work. For though it may be true that I no longer write, I still work from time to time. In my own fashion, at home and by hand, like a tailor. If I were more enterprising I'd open a shop on the Rue Mouffettard and hang out my shingle: "Maurice Pons, public author." I could really clean up! But I'm not enterprising.

Anyway, a Swedish publisher had commissioned me to do an article for an English encyclopedia he is bringing out in German on Japanese vellum, an essay on some Roman coins recently unearthed in Syria. He agreed to pay me in convertible Canadian dollars deposited to my account at the *Crédit Lyonnais*. Splendid, no?

I excel at this kind of work. My approach to history rests on a simple premise that any novelist might well adopt: whatever does not exist remains to be invented. In three days, with the aid of a magnifying glass and scissors, I succeeded in putting together an unrecorded episode in the history of Palmyra. I even dug up the name of one of Queen Zenobia's disputed sons, whose father I identified as the Roman emperor Aurelian. Such are the rewards of numismatics, an exact science that encourages the wildest suppositions.

Elated with myself, I addressed a large envelope to my editor and set forth for the village post office. I say "post

office” out of local pride, but pride has its charms. It is actually a very unprepossessing “auxiliary collection station,” but a delightful one that looks every bit like a rustic cottage. It is run, as it ought to be, by a former postmaster’s wife widowed during the last war who, for lack of business, spends the day behind her desk chatting with her cats and her pots of thriving greenery.

Several years ago I had urged her to enter the “Flowers for Post Offices Contest” sponsored by the postal administration. For three weeks I carted flower boxes and potted shrubs into Madame Volange’s office. Together we planted, pruned and watered, only to find ourselves automatically disqualified. A government circular informed us that auxiliary collection stations were ineligible to compete. The Jouff station remained decked with flowers and Madame Volange and I the best of friends.

In the course of duty, and knowing less about my personal affairs than the telephone operators in Viormes, she manages to keep close watch on my professional activities. Close enough to comment, as she weighed and stamped my letter to Sweden, “So you finally decided to write your article? What did you cook up this month for your Swedes?”

At this point, ordinarily, I begin to embroider. Madame Volange sees me as a great international historian, a front page, world-syndicated analyst of this planet’s social-economic affairs, brandishing incontestable statistics, exploding confidential eyewitness stories. But that day I didn’t feel up to the part. Ignoring her question, I handed over the requi-

site eleven francs seventy centimes for airmail postage to Stockholm on a “missive” weighing one hundred eighty grams. A solid investment in some future business.

Next I went across to the grocer’s, as I do every Wednesday, to pick up the weekly *Depêche de Viormes*, which I adore reading. Whether skies are fair or foul, as Diderot put it, it’s my habit to take my *Depêche* over to Madame Ham’s little tavern. My calling it a tavern is another instance of local pride, for officially it is nothing more than a “retail liquor shop, category IV,” installed in an isolated farmhouse several miles outside the town.

It’s my favorite spot in this part of the country. You open an iron gate and pass between two hedgerows of massive logs into a grassy yard full of frolicking ducks and yelping dogs. The room looks like a kitchen with its two long farm tables. You sit on benches, leaning back against the wall. It is heated in winter by a small, low-legged coal stove that purrs tenderly, its elbow-shaped pipe, braced by iron bands, rising to the roof. The place is deserted except on Sundays, when the old-timers come by for a game of dominoes and a glass of wine. They serve excellent calvados.

I like to go there when I’m alone and feel like reading my *Depêche*. Sometimes I stop in on Sunday mornings with Michèle to work the *Nouvel Observateur’s* crossword puzzle.

When Marie-Claire was around, we used to spend the whole afternoon there. Those were the days when she wanted to commit suicide.

We had got into the habit of dropping by the tavern to write up her last wishes. She had designed an elaborate “send-off” complete with barbiturates, razor blades, warm drinks, and blankets. We would ask Madame Ham for some squared paper and a ball-point pen and, week after week, work out a new and revised last will and testament listing the names of all Marie-Claire’s possessions, including cats, birds, and houses. To me she left nothing: “You’ve already had the choicest share.” In the end, she decided to go on living and moved in with another man three thousand miles away from me, in a cabin where she raises goats. But I know she’ll change her mind again and go off somewhere, some day, far, far away. For her eyes have glimpsed now and then what none of us dare to face.

Each time I enter the tavern, each time I sit down on the bench along the green wall, in front of the rickety stand with its shelves of multicolor glasses, I see Marie-Claire’s pale face and those immense eyes of hers, so dark, so lively, so remote, gone now, serenely, into another world. “Come with me,” she’d say sometimes, touching my arm with her icy little hand, “We’ll go together, peacefully, into the forest.”

No sooner had I opened the newspaper that Wednesday than there emerged out of the local news columns another face with the same solemn remoteness: it belonged to Maugendre, the body in the river last Sunday. The *Depêche* had published, reprinted from some identity card, a photograph of his placid doll-like features, already burdened with

sadness. The young editor had put together a hasty biographical sketch retracing the drab career of this insurance salesman, who was well thought of throughout the district, concluding in this way: "The unfortunate man, who suffered from a nervous breakdown, drowned himself in the Flanne just above Jouff." The paper extended its condolences to the victim's mother "in her painful bereavement." What caught my attention, however, was the announcement of funeral services at three that very afternoon in the tiny cemetery of Vaudeville.

In the silence of Madame Ham's tavern I listened to the ticking of the kitchen clock, on the wall above the stove. I know that clock so well. Along with the grunting dogs, the hissing tea kettle, and the slushing slippers of my heavy-haunched hostess, its faint, frail chime is another familiar sound. Every so often, at the end of a long, meditative afternoon, it has suddenly reminded me that I ought to let Madame Ham prepare dinner for her elderly husband, who returns home aching and mud-spattered from the beet fields.

Whenever I stand in the kitchen doorway waiting to pay for my calvados and cigarettes, I invariably glance up at this clock with its hexagonal wooden face and slender, ornamented bronze hands. Several times I've had to discourage Michèle—a cadger if ever there was one—from trying to buy it. "That clock looks fine just where it is. You can come and see it when you like. And what would owning it do for you anyway?"

I folded the newspaper and went to the kitchen door-

way to pay for my calvados and cigarettes. The clock said ten to four.

“What do I owe you?” I asked Madame Ham, who was snapping beans at the round table.

“You can pay me next time if you’re rushed,” she said, surprised at my uncustomary haste.

I hurried out and ran across the yard to my car.

There is a narrow country road that links Jouff directly with Vaudeville, bypassing Viormes. It is one of the most enchanting excursions in our region, plunging from bare fields into a shallow streamless hollow, slicing across acres of beet fields, then winding steeply upward toward the wooded slopes of the plateau. On evenings when I’m feeling blue, I head for this deserted roadway to drown my frustrations in the engine’s roar and the thrill of racing along at break-neck speed. My car seemed to recognize its favorite route, for despite the persistent drizzle drenching the landscape, it dove into the valley, streaking along the glistening straightaway like a motor boat, zooming up and around hairpin curves with sharp, moist sizzles of satisfaction. When I reached the Vaudeville cemetery the car was steaming like a purebred steeplechaser at the finish line.

The countryside in our neighborhood, and all over France for that matter, is dotted with cemeteries more or less discreet, more or less arrogant, always dominated by the ritual instrument of torture venerated by Christians. Some are secret places hidden among lush greenery, like

neglected gardens abandoned to the moss and ivy; some are relatively new, with bunches of plastic flowers and plexiglass tombs sprawled among gravel paths like drugstore display windows. There is one I won't name—no, not Les Alyscamps—where shadows glow beneath the roses on June evenings and the grass, so soft at night between the headstones, is a haven more for lovers than for mourners.

I could relate my many adventures in that graveyard and explain why I find it so pleasant to perform the “carnal act” among bones, to create joy in a land of grief. A sacrilegious streak in me? A penchant for exorcism? What does it matter, for the cemetery I visited that rainy afternoon was the one in Vaudeville, which is singularly forbidding: a flat, rigid, bare rectangle of black sod salvaged from the plow, in a remote corner of the township and wedged between four concrete walls. There's not even a gate: in its place is a cleft in the wall marked by two mountain ashes. The main path, strewn with dingy gravel, cuts straight through the heart of it, parting, as in a cathedral nave, those who may have loved in life and are never to be reunited.

The service took place in the upper left-hand corner of the rectangle. An old woman under black veils—the dead man's mother, I presumed—several brothers, brothers-in-law, or cousins in shabby suits, a small nephew decked out grotesquely à la Little Lord Fauntleroy, the hatted wife of the insurance company's regional manager, and two policemen from the Viormes precinct. This little group, mute and motionless in the rain, stood shivering around the open grave.



Local gravediggers in blue overalls had lowered the coffin into its trench and were about to withdraw the straps. The parish priest, who felt compelled to attend the ceremony (though not to shave for it), mumbled inaudible prayers in Latin. All the charity a suicide could expect.

I was standing off to one side next to the gendarmes, wondering what I was doing there. As will have been deduced by my readers, I have little stomach for religious ceremony. Political ambitions leave me cold, and I have never sought to win popularity in the district. No personal ties linked me to the drowned man, whom I met—if you can call it that—only after he had been floating in the river for several weeks.

The few times I happen to have joined a funeral procession or followed a hearse at random through the streets were in foreign capitals, out of idleness, out of curiosity, or simply to cheat boredom and the ever-present solitude of travelers.

As I could not expect the burial in Vaudeville to inform or divert me, I began to withdraw into myself, as I often do, letting my mind wander in an entirely new direction. I seem to recall that I was reenacting a particularly disturbing scene from childhood—the time I caught sight in the mirror of a little girl cousin sitting on the rug with her skirt up, frantically stroking herself between the legs with one hand reaching up into her red rayon bloomers. Suddenly, interrupting the flow of my thoughts, or rather images, one of the gendarmes nudged my arm and gravely handed me something resembling a gilded bronze phallus

with which all of us in turn, standing in the rain, were expected to sprinkle the drowned man's coffin. Stunned, I participated in this bizarre rite of disinfection. The gravediggers, with expectations no greater than mine, then began to fling spadefuls of stony mud onto the coffin.

Preceded by the widowed mother who was grieving silently on the arm of the parish priest, the burial procession filed out along the pebbly path. I brought up the rear, lagging behind the others, having no desire to socialize on this dismal occasion.

Only then did I see Mademoiselle B. entering the cemetery, delayed probably in getting to the service, but not the least hurried or flustered, dressed in white from head to toe, mincing along beneath a white umbrella.

It appeared to me that the black procession, which, owing to the design of the place, she could not avoid encountering at some point on the narrow pathway, suddenly incurvated like a snake to let her pass. Not from deference certainly, but in a collective gesture of repulsion which conveyed the willingness of these Christian mourners to tread on fresh graves and if need be on their respective crosses rather than brush against the lady's vaporous attire. From behind, I saw distinctly the heads shrinking aside and turning away; I saw the rush for the exit.

She, however, kept right on walking toward me with an air of supreme indifference. Far too elegantly dressed for the occasion, she wore a long white wool cape fastened at the neck, its hood framing her face. Draped about her throat was a flowing scarf. She had on woolen stockings

and silvery pumps. In one lace-gloved hand she held an old-fashioned umbrella much like a parasol; in the other, a sheaf of branches (I'm not kidding) with pale green leaves and red berries, torn, no doubt, from a mountain ash at the cemetery's entrance.

She passed in front of me, I greeted her, she ignored me. Walking on, she came to the grave, slipped in between the two gravediggers and, without a word, began tossing into the trench frail sprigs from her strange bouquet.

I lingered for a moment on the shoulder of the road bordering the cemetery. The hearse had already left for Viormes with the police van close behind. Family cars were returning to Vaudeville, undoubtedly to attend some post-mortem revel, as is the custom here.

The ground had been trampled, ploughed into muddy furrows by car wheels. The grass beneath one mountain ash was strewn with leaves, red berries, and bits of branches: vestiges of the minor botanical massacre perpetrated by Mademoiselle B.

The rain continued, mistier now and more chilling. I walked in circles around my car, plagued by indecision, rubbing my moist hands together, in a state of nervous tension.

The truth is I was watching for the strange graveside visitor to reappear. I waited, glancing occasionally through the cleft in the wall, while she performed her own exceedingly private burial rite in plain view of the disinterested gravediggers. It was over shortly. Soon she was on her way back, just as she had come, her steady, deliberate footsteps

resounding on the gravel pathway, the same air of utter detachment. Undaunted, I approached her.

"I have my car. Would you like a lift back to Jouff?"

"Thank you," she replied. "I like to walk."

"Even in the rain?"

"Even in the rain."

As she spoke there began to form on her porcelain face not so much a smile as a sneering pucker around the corners of her mouth and eyes. Her pace never slackened at my approach, and in no time I had reached her side. I was amazed that she had so few teeth. I also noticed the layer of dense white down above her upper lip. Her look and her voice were withering. She seemed to be saying, "What do I give a damn about the rain? or your car? or you, mister?" In short, she dismissed me faster than a pick-up from Montparnasse. And off she went, under her umbrella, leaving me standing there.

I climbed into my car and gunned the motor furiously. To avoid meeting her on the way to Jouff, I headed in the opposite direction, taking the Viormes road back to town. I arrived home greatly distressed, and stretched out prone on the rug, arms akimbo, resolved to stay there—a habit of mine—doing nothing for hours.

Late that evening the telephone's insistent ring roused me from my prostration: the girls at the Viormes switchboard were bored and wanted someone to talk to.

"Boy, you sure take a long time to answer. We'd get hell for doing that. You dozing or what?"

“No, I wasn’t asleep, I was thinking.”

“Uh, uh! That’ll get you into trouble.”

“Don’t worry, the damage is already done.”

“Hey, kidding aside, have you eaten?”

“No, I haven’t had dinner yet. I just told you I was . . .”

“O.K. ’cause there’s my girl friend, her boyfriend lent her his car and we’re gettin’ off at ten . . .”

“You? Drive a car? You must be mad the two of you! There’s a turn on the way out of Viormes!”

“Listen, you’re not the only licensed driver around here. Hold on, some jerk’s calling in, have to take him . . . We’ll be over by ten after. Call you back. So long.”

They never called back, but at ten past ten there they were, Brigitte and Stéphanie, single, droll, provocative, like all young women nowadays, carrying themselves like coach horses with their swaying hips and sudden shudders.

We had a gay time. I made a bowl of cold lime punch; Brigitte, some hot chocolate; Stéphanie, eggs fried with pepper. We loaded all this on trays and took it into my bedroom, where we picnicked on top of cushions on the rug, which soon began pitching like some magic carpet out of the *Arabian Nights*.

Stéphanie was in top form. She had us in stitches as, exploding into giggles, she explained the political skuldugery behind an obscure French electoral system: the beauty contest, which causes as much stir and intrigue on the local level, she claims, as do presidential elections. “Boy are those guys on the town councils itching to get screwed. That

goes for the police too. Married guys, you know, always on the sly. You should see the presents I've received. Just for parading my ass across the stage."

Their jobs at the telephone company kept the girls abreast of extra-marital affairs among the local bourgeoisie. And having privately sampled—and exchanged—a fair number of those gentlemen made them experts in the field of comparative sexual mores. Their lusty, graphic imagery, their peals of helpless laughter detonated by Cuban light rum rang out in the night and filled the silent house. Little by little the room began to look like a lunatic camp.

I was still clinging to my senses though, and at some point in our verbal meanderings, with a reporter's investigative obstinacy, I flung out the subject of the insurance agent we had buried earlier that day. Brigitte and Stéphanie rocked with laughter.

"You mean old Condom Face? They say he wound up in the drink," Brigitte commented, ladling herself another glass of punch.

"That's what you call him, Condom Face?"

Stéphanie, who was sprawled on a bolster, suddenly bounced to her feet, hoisting up her plaid hip-length mini-skirt, and rushed off to the bathroom. "Lemme take a leak first! It's too funny . . . Wait a minute and I'll tell you . . ."

I monitored the procedure from its familiar sounds. I didn't have to move an inch in order to tell that the shameless minx was as usual urinating while sitting on top of the sink, after turning on both faucets full strength. I know that

one day there'll be a deafening crash and I'll find Stéphanie on the floor, her bare bottom nested in the shattered basin. That will trigger another burst of laughter. And force me to replace the wobbly sink of certain pre-1914 vintage.

Not this time. Stéphanie returned intact, snapping under her skirt the elastic on her red white and blue panties. "What was I saying?" she resumed at once. "Oh yeah, the dead guy. You didn't know about him huh?"

The funeral oration delivered by my young friend in memory of the departed man surpassed, for incongruity, obscenity, and hilarity, Bossuet's loftiest rhetorical feats. Though I couldn't begin to do it justice here, a number of profoundly liberating images have stuck in my mind: particularly the one of the dead man who owned a fishing shack overlooking the Flanne and who held nocturnal revels with the young girls of Viormes in the grass along the river banks, stark nude except for a pair of garters and a condom . . . The police must not have been aware of his participation in these rural bacchanalia. Had Sergeant Clairout known about them I doubt he would have maintained his edifying opinion of the victim: "Such a decent man besides . . ."

How thrilling yet difficult it is, I thought, to reconstruct with conflicting, kaleidoscopic images, the fragmentary biography of a stranger. And to reflect that each of us on earth will have left behind no more than a trail of contradictory, incoherent impressions fitted onto a human form, itself as malleable and changing as a tree in the cycle of seasons, sooner or later to die in a murky riverbed or in a

snowbank along some wintry road, bound, in any case, for the rich earth of the graveyard. Even Stéphanie and Brigitte, so gay, so young, so alive: suddenly I visualized them parading their rotting, disembodied skeletons no less indecently than their silken pubis through transparent underthings. An old flame of theirs would comment drily, "Remember her at the fair in Wizout, firing away at those bears in the shooting gallery? She was wearing that little plaid skirt and white tights . . ." What was the point of it all? To join for mere seconds in the unending ballet of millions of human constellations whirling about the earth's surface . . .

"About this woman they say he used to visit," I persisted as our laughter faded, "do you know Mademoiselle B.? Did he ever mention her?"

No, Brigitte and Stéphanie had never heard of her. Not surprising either if she lived out in the sticks like a regular hick, without even a telephone.

"They're saying that Maugendre drowned himself because of her."

"Likely story. If every two-timed guy jumped in the river we'd have a flood!"

Remembering just then that they were due at work early in the morning and still had Marcel's car to return, the girls jumped up and grabbed shoes, sweaters, handbags, hairbrushes, lighters, jewelry, cosmetics and all the clutter on the floor, half of which they undoubtedly overlooked. Then they dissolved into a burst of laughter on the lawn, and soon I heard the car of that Marcel guy spluttering off



along the dirt road. I lingered for a moment in the dark, as treetops swayed fitfully in the wind, commiserating with the grinding gears.

I woke the next morning tingling with unwonted determination. Though it was still windy, the sun was out. Long white clouds raced above the Flanne. I dressed hurriedly, went down to the landing and pushed off in my boat. I was resolved to press my inquiry and annoyed at myself for having waited this long to look up Monsieur Max.

It takes a good half hour to row upstream from my place to the Quérolles landing. Of course I could have saved time by driving there like everyone else, but as Jouff's tavern is accessible by boat, why deprive oneself of such a rare pleasure? In Venice too, as far as I know, it's not uncommon to row from one glass of wine to the next.

During the war, the townspeople seem to have resurrected old six-oared barges and set up a communal ferry service to meet the train from Paris at the Viormes station. Imagine the stores of black-market food that must have cruised these waters. Nowadays the river is obsolescent. Only a handful of mildly demented Britons still journey from the North Sea to the Mediterranean along French inland waterways.

One winter evening I spotted a small sailing vessel, battered and listing badly, tying up at the dock below my house. Onto the landing marched a black cat, a white dog, and finally an elderly retired Canadian couple. They had

sold their farm eight years before and set sail, not from Montreal—but from Vancouver. They had neatly circled the two Americas, these fledgling sailors, braving successive storms off the Peruvian and later the Chilean coast. They had roamed the Atlantic bound for Iceland. All they wanted was a warm bath and a fresh start for the Suez Canal.

To tell the truth, they were in no hurry. They anchored at my dock for a few days, took a few hot baths, consumed a few bottles of whiskey, played a few hands of bridge. Then off they went again on their trip around the world, promising to write me on their return to Vancouver. That was four years ago; I'm still waiting for their postcard. And I have yet to read in *France-Soir* that a small Canadian sailing ship went down off Aden or Djakarta . . .

I did well to take the boat, for on reaching Quérolles' landing, I found him down by the shore with his friend Rendu, engrossed in the pleasures of lumbering. The past night's storm had damaged some of his trees, uprooting a dead walnut which the two men were busy logging. With a portable chain saw that chewed away at the timber they reduced the trunk to blocks and then drove into the blocks, panting and heaving, enormous steel wedges that made the hard wood groan and crack. They must have been working since daybreak, for an impressive pile of logs covered the grass at the foot of a birch.

Quérolles seemed unsurprised to see me rowing up. "I thought you'd be over for a visit. I hear you went to

the funeral and spoke to the woman." He drove straight to the point, like his wedges driving straight into the heart of the timber. "You're interested in this business, right?"

He paused momentarily to peer at me slyly out of sheepish eyes, then he spat on his palms, rubbed them, and raised his sledge hammer once more. Skillfully, Rendu slid wedges into the block's broadening cleft.

I sat on the log pile and watched as the block of wood split in half, then quarters, and finally eighths. It was some hunk of tree: each log must have weighed a solid forty pounds.

My nautical exercises and the crisp morning air had sparked my appetite. I proposed to Monsieur Max that we have a quiet chat at the tavern.

"Go ahead, I'll join you in a minute," he answered, "after I cut up this one hulk."

The hillside above Quérolles' dock is very steep. A narrow path overrun with tall weeds and ferns rises sharply, twisting in and out among the trees. Beeches and pines, but mostly birches trembling in the wind. I made it up there thoroughly winded and ordered coffee and a buttered roll from the proprietress. She served me and returned to the kitchen. The room was deserted at that early hour.

Quérolles arrived shortly. He went behind the bar to fetch his own private bottle of white wine and two glasses, then came to the table I had chosen at the back of the room and sat down facing me. He filled the glasses, settled his elbows on the table, sandwiched his hands under his chin

and, looking me straight in the eye, began speaking slowly and deliberately.

“About Maugendre, you could see it happening long ago . . . Fine man, a gentleman I’d call him. He worked for an insurance company, good salesman too; had a number of customers in this area; handled fire, theft, old age insurance and that sort of thing. He used to come here fairly often to collect his premiums, sell from door to door, and once in a while he’d stop in for a drink. He drove that little car of his, you know, the white ‘4L’ they found on the riverbank. What I’m trying to say is I knew him pretty well, we weren’t pals, but I knew him pretty well. Besides, he was the silent type, kind of withdrawn. Especially toward the end. We didn’t see much of him then. But everyone knew he was keeping company with the lady behind the dike. Mind you, I don’t poke my nose in other people’s business; they can do what they please, and believe me, I never would have breathed a word of this to him. It’s common gossip though. He must have called on her the first time about her insurance, before the winter. After all, she owns property, she has a house. Calling on people was his business. Trouble is he went back there often. More often than he had to. And what was bound to happen happened.”

“What *did* happen?”

“So, Monsieur Pons, I see you haven’t heard the whole story. Always so busy with your writing. But you could write a book about what I’m telling you. Not a novel, a real book. Because some awfully queer things are going on here

that no one notices. If it were Princess Soraya or someone like that, there'd be headlines. On television too. But Maugendre wasn't the first to run into trouble. You remember Aurélien, who used to work for you when you came here. Well, you never saw him again, did you? Neither did I."

"But I thought . . . because his wife left him . . ."

"Listen, you mean you never wondered why his wife up and walked out on him one day? To America? Not exactly the beaten path. You even drove her to the airport, I remember. Didn't she tell you anything? Come to think of it, maybe she didn't know anything, not much anyway. And how about Martial Revon, who owned the Alaouette farm, young Martine's father? He was running over to the dike too. And Dr. Bluche, maybe you didn't know him, the first doctor we ever had here. She sent for him one evening . . ."

Yes, I had met Dr. Bluche. A strange man. It was the year I moved to Jouff, around November. I had my son Fabien with me, who couldn't have been more than five. His mother was roaming the globe; she must have been with the Vietnamese on the Ho Chi Minh Trail round about then. I had called up this local doctor, whose name I got from the telephone directory, to ask if he would give my son an injection or vaccination of some sort. He scheduled a late afternoon appointment at his office. "You'll find it easily," he assured me, "it's the last house within the township on the Viormes road."

I did in fact find it easily: a limestone villa, suburban-Paris style, ill-proportioned and perfectly hideous. Encir-

cling the house was a small, fallow garden decorated with ceramic storks, rabbits, and giant mushrooms. A museum of horrors. Before I could tell Fabien, "Don't look it's too ugly," he was already chirping gleefully, "Look Daddy, a bunny, a stork, a tortoise!" A short flight of stone steps under a stucco porch roof led up to the house. On the left side of the glass door ornamented with iron tracery hung a battered bell chain. I tugged at it gingerly, expecting the whole works to come tumbling down on my head. After a pause, I heard heavy footsteps which shook the house and seemed to be descending a spiral stairway. The scraping of a bolt, of a key, and the door opened . . . I was confronting a hairy colossus, Dr. Bluche himself, a man in his fifties. He looked haggard, and obviously hadn't shaved for several days, though his puffed features still bore the traces of previous nicks and scrapes. He wore an open shirt, not the cleanest, which he probably had slipped on hastily, without taking time to button it, when I rang the bell. A pair of wool house slippers covered his bare feet.

"Oh, it's you. For that famous injection. Come in."

My son and I followed him into a small kitchen littered with dishes, bottles, and pots. Without a word, he lit a gas burner and began warming a pan of water. After locating a syringe in his medical case, he took it apart and dropped it piece by piece into the pan. I noticed his trembling fingers, his black fingernails, the tiny cuts and gashes covering his hands.

"You have the serum, I trust," he said at last.

I nodded and produced the vial from my pocket. I

glanced over at my son, who looked scared to death. I wondered if we ought to forget the whole business and find some excuse to leave.

The doctor stood silently, with his back to us, contemplating his pan of simmering water. Then he stepped over to the sink, washed his hands methodically with yellow soap and dried them thoroughly. Tossing the towel aside suddenly, he flipped off the burner and turned around. He was staring at me, but I had the impression he could barely keep open those deep blue eyes of his, so full of sadness. "Excuse me, I'd prefer not to do it just now. Telephone me in a day or so."

The ruling was final. Fabien beamed happily; I felt happy too. The doctor took us to the door, carefully bolting and locking it after us. We danced through the garden on the way out.

I didn't call or see Dr. Bluche again. Shortly afterwards, I heard that he had closed his "office," sold the house and left town. I never understood, or made any real effort to understand, his odd behavior and up to now had not given much thought to what became of him. But nearly fifteen years later, here was Quérolles reminding me of the forgotten scene and casting an eery light on its main character.

"Yes," he continued, "the lady sent for him one evening, as you yourself might have done. But afterwards he went there regularly every night, and sometimes during the day as well. You'd see his car tearing along. He didn't stay for just fifteen minutes either; he stayed for hours, for the

whole night, and she's no sicker than you or me. In those days you could often see her in town, going to market, the bakery, occasionally the post office, always wearing her long cloaks and hoods. Does it surprise you to hear that some of the women cross themselves when she goes by?"

(The ghostly image of Madame Fijutte flashed through my head. "I can believe it, I can believe it," I was tempted to say, but kept silent, loathe to interrupt his tale.)

"She never came to our house, mind you, but one day quite a while back, my wife bumped into her at the grocer's across the street. Well, what they say is true; my wife saw it, and you can believe her. She's no bigot and doesn't go in for horoscopes or see the devil in every basin of holy water. No, sir!"

(So now the word is finally out, I thought to myself.)

"But this is a fact, and my wife saw it with her own eyes: at the grocer's, when the lady went to pay she took off her glove, an ordinary glove, wool or something, and underneath it she had on another glove, very thin, pure white, the kind they use for communion, a glove she could wear and still take out or put money in her purse. And one thing's the honest truth, Monsieur Pons, and you can't deny it: no one around here has ever laid eyes on that woman's hands."

For the last few words Quérolles had dropped his voice to a dramatic, mysterious whisper—scarcely befitting a country tavern keeper accustomed to speaking in the common idiom, to handling cases of beer, the gaff on his fishing skiffs, and the woodsplitter's ax. At one time or another I



had seen him comforting a terrified ewe about to be shorn in his lap, or solacing a sobbing old drunk at the bar. Yet never would I have imagined that his hopelessly earthbound spirit could stray thus far afield, on a totally unpredicted course, guided mysteriously by a lady's lace glove.

Now I, too, had noticed the white gloves she wore the day before in Vaudeville's cemetery. And I distinctly recall my own surprise when she extended a gloved hand to me the one and only time I had intruded upon her at home. Still, I was totally unprepared to go along with Quérolles' tenuous extrapolations. "So what?" I retorted rudely, "What does that prove? She wears gloves, and that's that." I was nervous, and smoking one cigarette after another.

From under his shaggy eyebrows Monsieur Max darted a look at me, not really sad, but a trifle disappointed. He seemed to be thinking, "Why put myself out if he refuses to understand?" He gulped down the last of his wine, and suddenly picked up his story again, as if these confessions really meant a great deal to him. "To get back to the doctor, some say he drank a lot, that he was an alcoholic. I doubt it. Everyone drinks around here and it's no problem. Others will tell you he was 'bewitched' by the woman. Between you and me, that sort of thing doesn't hold much water nowadays, and there I agree with you. Still, he died in such a strange way. Listen, someone saw him returning from the dike one winter morning at daybreak, streaking through town in that noisy car of his. He drove up to his house and went upstairs—somebody saw the lights go on. He stayed there a while, maybe to pack his things. Personally, I think

it was to destroy his papers, because afterwards there was a pile of cinders in the stove. Then, like a streak of lightning, he took off down the highway. Nobody knows where he went. He hasn't been seen since. He even left some lights on and the doors wide open—strange for a man who was always so fussy about locking up. He had appointments that afternoon too; the patients had to wait . . . They're still waiting."

The tavern keeper walked me back down to the shore. Meanwhile, his friend Rendu had finished cutting up the walnut tree and was now valiantly engaged in dividing the piles of long, gnarled logs into cords and fractions of cords. Sawdust, splinters, and bark littered the ground.

I shook hands with the two men and unhitched my boat.

"I guess I haven't told you anything about Maugendre you don't know already," Quérolles said. "Only that it came as no surprise to the rest of us. We could see it happening, just like that, after the doctor, after old man Revon. How should I put it? They say women have the gift of life; well, when it comes to the lady you'd say just the opposite. In a sense, she gives all her boyfriends the urge to die. Why? How? That's another matter. I've never gone over there to find out . . . And I'd advise you not to go there either."

Rendu had come down to the dock: Considerately, he took the rope from my hands and steadied the skiff while I jumped aboard and prepared to row. He watched me with

an air of gentle mockery, his head cocked to one side. He seemed to be thinking, "Apparently this guy has nothing to do all day long." Then out of the blue, as if prodded by some reckless, titillating impulse, he announced, "Well anyway we know who's next on the list, and we're taking bets, in case you're interested."

With the tip of his shoe he thrust the boat out into midstream. I leaned forward, digging the oars deep into the water behind me, then pulling hard to advance against the current. The skiff left a perfect triangle in its wake and sent ripples lapping against the pilings.

"If I hear anything, I'll be by to let you know," Quérolles shouted.

On the subject of Mademoiselle B.'s ancestry the most dubious tales are told. They say her mother was "unknown" and she had no legal father.

Her birth was duly recorded, as I can testify, in the town hall of Jouff on November 7, 1942. Her putative father, an unwed journeyman mason named Antonin, presumably quit work forever at an early age to devote himself wholeheartedly to the solitary pleasures of drink. He was a broad stub of a man, a rustic, ruddy-cheeked Silenus, with a snub-nose and silver hair. The image left etched on the memories of those who knew him was of a reeling, ragged ball of flabby flesh which, tangled in the loose tails of the wide flannel sash around his belly, went rolling in ditches on nights of drunkenness.

For years he lived alone in a mud hut, a doorless, windowless former pigshed which he'd patched up and plastered. It still stands today in Viormes, on the edge of the woods, delapidated, invaded by brambles, tenanted by bats.

He distilled his own liquor for which he had acquired something of a reputation. People said he could coax brandy out of almost anything in the ground: beets, elderberries, squash, radishes, carrots, to say nothing of the rotten scraps of meat and poultry he salvaged from the public dump. He always went about with an army canteen dangling from one

shoulder and, in the course of his rural peregrinations, might be found sitting in the grass against a tree trunk, sucking rapturously at his flask, on the edge of sweet stupor. Now and then his nose or ears bled.

During the summer of 1940, having long since adopted, despite the law and its guardians, this peculiar pattern of anarchistic sloth, a handful of German soldiers who were passing the time in his neighborhood nearly had his number called. There were momentary fears for his safety. But Antonin managed to ingratiate himself with the forces of occupation. In return for treating the *feldwebels* to a few rounds of drinks and for consenting to part with a few casks of home brew at outrageous prices, he won their favor and survived the war unmolested.

Periodically he seemed to recall having once been a mason, and a competent one, so they said, able to pile angular chunks of granite one atop the other as high as a man's eye, or climb a ladder balancing a window ledge on his shoulder. The contractors who used to hire him at construction sites swore that he put out more work than a pulley block. He owned several tools of his trade and, when so inclined, could mix up a batch of mortar and put a roof over his head, build himself a shanty or repair one.

Thus one November evening in 1942 . . .

One evening in November Antonin had just demolished with his sledge hammer the supporting wall of a cowshed which had been abandoned for years and lay half in ruins and which was infested, like the old pigshed today,

with blackberry vines and bats. He saved for reuse the salvageable stone and unrotted beams, as well as the clay tiles so in demand nowadays. The base of the wall, which provided hollowed indentations for a feeding trough, was constructed of cinder blocks crudely joined with a mixture of cement, lime, and sand—mostly sand.

Antonin had worked hard most of the day. It was one of his relatively sober periods. He had chipped away part of the plaster with a hammer and dislodged a fair number of cinder blocks with a crowbar. They say—but who will ever know the truth, much less believe it?—that in prying loose, inch by inch, the last cornerstone, he discovered, wedged in an interstice, on a bed of moldering plaster between two stones, a bundle of rags, straw, and old papers.

Why, instead of simply tossing it out with the other refuse, did his curiosity prompt him to undo and sort through it? And what did he find in this plaster-coated parcel that seemed to have been crouching there forever in shrouded solitude? They say he was shocked to discover some kind of tiny creature, which at first he took to be a frog holed up for the winter or a hibernating bat, and who seemed suddenly blinded by the daylight, whose vacant eyes began to blink, whose heart began to pulse, faintly but inexorably, through the paper. Yes, a heartbeat.

I repeat that it could have been merely a frog or a bat. In an earlier book of mine I related a fascinating childhood discovery I made in the maze of evacuated trenches adjoining the Rhine fortifications at Strasbourg, of a colony of frightened, blinded, palpitating frogs who were wintering

in slimy loam among the shell casings. Also, in moving into my house in Jouff, I evicted whole families of squeaking barbastes which had probably been nesting for ages in the joints of ancient beams. We know that chiropters are mammals. The females possess two wee downy breasts with pink nipples. They nurse their young. I also remember that on a trip I made one winter to that astounding country, Estonia, for the filming of my book *Passage de la nuit*, we plucked up, so to speak, a young polar she-bear fast asleep in the hollow of a willow tree deep in the snowbound forests bordering the Gulf of Finland, above Tallinn. But not even the wildest dreams could conjure up a bear in these parts, there are no bears around here. And how could a frog or pipistrelle ever manage to wrap itself in those papers and rags? How would it have survived the winter, or ten winters, or maybe a hundred? And how much less could a human offspring, male or female . . .

None of Jouff's residents gave an ounce of credibility to the old drunkard's belated, preposterous confessions. One fact alone is certain: when he died several years after the Liberation (in the most mundane fashion, having been found face up in a ditch one morning, a victim of the bottle), he left, in that isolated house behind the dike which he came one day to occupy, and subsequently to legally possess, though God knows how, an ageless maiden whom no one had ever seen as a child or an adult, whom no one could ever swear was his mother, his wife, or his sister, though he declared when drunk that she was his daughter.

The villagers dismiss this last proposal as utter nonsense. For ages now Antonin's fornications have constituted one of the raciest chapters in the local annals. Still it's a chapter grounded in disbelief. For in fact everyone concedes that despite persistent acrobatic efforts, the poor fellow was incapable of mating with anything female. Much less of siring an offspring.

Classic jokes have sprung up about the way he was shaped and his virility. Wagging tongues assert (God knows on what authority) that his "parts" receded in concert with his bulging belly, that his "instrument" attained in toto precisely the measurements and prominence of a superfluous navel, surmounted by a kind of whimsical clitoris. A number of persons who had seen him urinate insist that only a child's fingers, or better still a clothespin, could have grasped his "cock" and extended it beyond his fly. So Antonin pissed cheerfully in his pants, except on holidays and washdays when he pulled them down and squatted in the grass like a little girl.

Whenever the temporary absence of drink aroused sudden vague sexual promptings in him, he would scout the countryside for weird and ludicrous forms of relief. Herdsmen had seen him in the moonlight massaging his bare behind against the flanks of cows, goats, or sheep. "He'd always go for the ugliest one in the lot!" they reported, shrieking with laughter.

At times they had discovered him caressing the underside of his paunch with one hand, while the other fingered a



sow's tits or roamed the underparts of a fat cat dozing in his lap with its paws in the air.

Five or six times in his life, in tripping over some tipsy woman collapsed in a haymow or a grassy ditch, he would leap on her with animal cries, knead or pinch her breasts, hoist up her skirts to explore her belly, to bite her thighs and buttocks. As far as I know, never within living female memory did his offenses—or feats, if you will—go any farther. Thus when he betook himself to the town hall in Jouff to register the birth of a daughter . . .

The literary profession in present-day France is sheer anarchism. No law forbids anyone from sitting down at a desk and trailing words onto a sheet of paper. Things become complicated only when one of us takes it into his head to reproduce those sentences in multiple copies and offer the resulting volume for sale in bookstores.

I can never forget the despairing confession made to me one evening, under the green desk lamp in his office, by René Julliard, my first editor. “Dear Maurice Pons,” he sighed in that soft, solemn voice of his, “what a strange profession is ours. A profession that involves purchasing quantities of excellent paper and blackening it with ink, only to resell it for the price of used paper.”

What he failed to tell me, and subsequently I had to learn painfully on my own, is that once the unfortunate writer is published and sold in the marketplace, the authorities and the public, who have completely ignored him

heretofore, suddenly become intensely interested in him. He finds himself indexed, catalogued, labeled, tabulated, and registered by an incredible host of organizations, both public and private, who are bent on preventing any nonsalaried "creative artists" from eluding their diligent file clerks. They hound him mercilessly throughout his prime, bound and determined to secure him a contented old age . . . Rest assured, young readers, society will of course allow more than one literary Mozart to starve and perish in the bud. But once you show signs of becoming not so much rich and famous as, let's say, established and recognized as "a talent," the social services will lavish their undying attention on you.

I shall not pursue my complaints about the unfortunate lot of writers or the social and cultural aberrations of government. It's generally assumed that Racine, like filtered coffee, will eventually pass. No, let me return from this pointless digression to the event that prompted it, and surprised me one morning as I was musing down by the riverside, tossing chips of wood into the water and watching them spin around just below the dock, near the spot where we had moored the body.

It was during the week. I was alone. The weather was fine. I had on a pair of old espadrilles with soles so worn that the grass tickled my big toes. I tried to imagine the current condition of the dead man's big toes. I was also thinking of those strange tales about Mademoiselle B.'s parents.

I heard steps on the gravel driveway. On a weekday at

that hour, it could only be my friend the postwoman.

Jouff's postwoman, with her beret tilted over one ear and her mailbag swinging from her shoulder, is an exceedingly affable and cheering person, and an unrivaled hiker. We have a perfect arrangement concerning the mail: if she has nothing of interest to me in her pouch—newspapers, advertising circulars and the like—she cinches it in an elastic band and stuffs it into my American-style mailbox nailed to a post on the main road. But if she spots an elegantly penned envelope likely to please me, or an exotic postcard, or a bright-colored foreign stamp, down the slope she marches to fetch me, waving the missive and calling out, "A real letter, Monsieur Pons, a real letter!"

Usually we read it together in the kitchen over a glass of something, conferring at length on its contents. She also scouts me out from a purely professional sense of duty, as when the post office, in connection with a registered letter or an acknowledgment of one, requires my autograph not on a magazine photo but in its receipt book.

Such was the case that lovely June morning. One of the myriad administrative agencies keeping tabs on my sunshine years and my illicit income, in a violent though commendable fit of housekeeping, urged me to fill out and return within a week the citizen's registration card which alone could insure continued administrative efficiency and provide incontestable proof of my legal existence. The anonymous signer of this communication was kind enough to suggest that I execute said form not in my birthplace, thank God, which would have compelled me to depart in-

stantly for Strasbourg and risk my life on that horrendous Highway 4—though it would have made little sense to kill myself in pursuit of a birth certificate—but from my local municipal office, meaning Jouff's town hall. A postscript counseled me to appear with military papers in good order so as not to delay issuance of the document in question. So now the army was rearing its head . . .

I won't try to describe the panic into which this anonymous advice plunged me. Suffice it to say that I have never had dealings, epistolary or other, with any military agency in France or elsewhere. The only weapon I've ever fired is a hunting rifle, and I'm a crack shot. I pride myself on never having worn a uniform of any description—except on the stage, as a boy, when I played Roman soldiers in tunics and knights in coats of mail. Furthermore I'm convinced that if ever misfortune compels me to don military dress, my body will automatically manifest such acute signs of revulsion as to leave my superiors no alternative but to have me stripped down and carted off to the infirmary. In short, I do not have, I have never had, I will never have military papers. In contrast to the tax bureau, or to the Orchestra Pension Fund to which, for some mysterious reasons, I am obliged to contribute regularly, the French Army has not yet singled me out: we ignore each other. It was by choice, not by chance, that I, like Victor Hugo seeking exile on the Isle of Jersey, settled in Jouff on the banks of the Flanne, heroically cutting myself adrift from Paris at the very moment a certain well-known general, whose name I decline to mention out of decency as well as principle, began his

military occupancy of the Elysée Palace and usurped the presidency of this republic. Nor am I about to return.

So I spent the rest of the morning fumbling through drawers and the bottom of my revolving bookcase, through the glove compartment of my car and the hat boxes in the bathroom (systematic soul that I am) desperately seeking a substitute for official identity papers, if only my old membership card in the Franco-Chinese Friendship League or my Defender of Film Libraries badge. Armed at last with these very personal memorabilia, I set off after lunch for the town hall in Jouff.

Not for the world would I normally set foot in a municipal office. Still, there's a democratic streak in me: I become very emotional whenever I enter a provincial town hall, one of those charming, old-fashioned buildings of the Jules Ferry era which double as schoolroom and schoolmaster's lodging. A short flight of steps, a glass door, a room with bare walls, the sole decoration a bust of *Marianne* and a head of René Coty.

"Why Coty?" I had inquired one election day long after that president's death.

"Ah, because Coty was a *national*," I was informed.

"A national?"

"Yes, unlike de Gaulle or Pétain for instance, a genuine no-nonsense *national*. None of this hanky-panky."

The room has a heavy square table covered with a green cloth, file bins and cabinets, and a voting booth. In a corner under the window is a second table with an ancient typewriter and desk lamp; and behind this table sits an

ancient lady with a bun and spectacles, the mayor's secretary.

The mayor of Jouff is a Parisian, and totally invisible. I have the utmost respect however for Madame Pautard who for over thirty years, three times a week between two and five o'clock, has represented and exercised local administrative authority. I rarely call on her yet I know she is there, summer and winter, her presence as reassuring as a familiar clock.

In just a few minutes, without fuss and without asking me for a single identity card, she typed out the form I needed and stamped it with the municipal seal. My mind was at rest—I could now tranquilly make my annual contribution to the Orchestra Pension Fund—and without further ado I broached the topic on my mind. For there's no doubt I'd never have sought out the mayor's secretary so promptly if I hadn't wanted something else; the registration form gave me an excuse to delve into the municipal archives for details on the identity of a person far more interesting than me: Mademoiselle B.

"I see you're checking up on me," Madame Pautard observed with a little laugh. "There was some trouble at the time . . . But see for yourself, it's all in the book."

She took down the municipal register from its shelf, set it on the table with the green cloth, and opened it. "Let me see now, I think it must have been the winter of '41 or '42," she murmured, "yes, November '42 . . ."

So Mademoiselle B. existed. The strange creature I had encountered twice already and about whom everyone had

something to tell me, was neither myth nor ghost. Her existence, like my own, was duly recorded in ink in a municipal register. Her first and last names, her sex, the date, time, and place of her birth, her father's name and profession were all there in writing. "Still, it seems odd that you've written 'mother unknown' . . . You don't have to write that very often, do you?" I inquired.

"No, rarely. But it does happen. In France, at any rate, the father registers a newborn child. When there is a father. Within three days of the baby's birth."

"Assuming there is a birth?"

"Well, we have no way of checking that. Our business is to record the voluntary report of a birth, not to investigate it. Anyway, it was wartime. Remember that the Germans were poking their noses everywhere. We didn't want to cause any trouble for poor Antonin. Suppose he were harboring some young Jewish girl. Or a gipsy. There were lots of them around."

I kept silent for a moment, automatically turning the registry pages. Madame Pautard's explanation was interesting; from what I knew, it fitted Antonin's whimsical, generous character. She was exorcising the myths by reducing them to practical considerations. Yet she raised other mysteries that surely must have been cleared up after the Liberation. What was her motive? Perhaps only the guilty conscience of a relatively insignificant locality that had survived occupation and the Resistance with few signs of damage, and fewer deeds of patriotism to its credit. Surely the official

explanation did not tell all. This time, however, I was determined to find out everything. The last page in the register carried a fresh entry for the death of Fernand Maugendre, native of Jouff, resident of Vaudeville, forty-four years old, insurance agent, unmarried, childless.

“Just between you and me, Madame Pautard, do you think Antonin was the father?”

The good woman flushed purple, as if I had just uttered some obscenity; covering her mouth lightly with one hand, as Japanese women sometimes do, she began to titter. “Oh, my, no, I don’t think so. I never did think so, really. Heavens, no.” Giggling helplessly, she added, “I guess you didn’t know him . . . poor fellow!”

I was in no mood to hear another series of bawdy neighborhood tales, having my ears full already. I am a citizen of this community, a long-standing registered voter; I had consulted the mayor’s secretary during normal business hours to obtain specific public information. I had personally inspected an official document, a birth certificate. Yet here was Madame Pautard laughing her head off and relying on neighborhood gossip to cast doubt on the validity of a state document, on the certified paternity of a fellow citizen, on the virility of a departed townsman! “Good God!” I thought, “Sometimes I feel like a budding reactionary!”

I walked round and round the square table, then switched tactics and tried to attack the problem in terms of dates and figures. “But look here, if this woman was born, as your records show, in November 1942, she would now be,



let's see, 72 minus 42: just 30 years old. You know her, you've seen her. She looks about 60, or maybe 160, I don't know. And in some ways she's just a girl, she's 16 years old . . ."

"I see what you're driving at," Madame Pautard retorted, returning to her former stiffness. "I see you've been listening to gossip. But I stick by my register: until I have proof to the contrary, a person's age is determined by the date of his birth. That date appears on the birth certificate issued to the father and registered in the town hall: November 7, 1942."

"Come on now, you've admitted that the father isn't the father and the mother is unknown. So, if there's no correlation between the birth and the birth certificate . . ."

"That is not my business, Monsieur Pons," the secretary shot back, snapping the register shut. She turned abruptly and went to replace the volume on its shelf. "If you want my opinion, I think Antonin made his declaration at that particular moment because having a little girl would entitle him to milk and sugar rations. Maybe it was a child he had taken in years before, I don't know. And what would he have done with the milk anyway? As you know, it was not his favorite beverage."

The contradictions were piling up. I felt confused. Obviously, the conversation had ended; I knew I could not expect to learn anything more. Turning, I headed for the door and would have walked straight out in a huff, but caught myself in time to smile at the old lady and stammer, "I almost forgot to thank you for the registration form."

Now this lady occupies all my thoughts. And haunts my nights.

Michèle was here again yesterday, asleep at my side in the big red bed. I'm sure I wasn't sleeping. I woke suddenly at daybreak. "Michèle! Michèle! Look who's there on the bench."

Opening her eyes, tossing her hair, she raised herself on one elbow. She glanced around the room. Pale rays of light filtered through the ribbed curtains. Clothes, shoes, and handbags littered the rugs; stacks of papers, newspapers, and books cluttered the desk. The shade on my round Russian lamp resembled a yellow pumpkin. Across the bottom shelf of my revolving bookcase the contiguous spines of Larousse dictionaries traced a gleaming trail. Draped over the bench in front of my writing table were trousers, sweaters, a white bra. Nothing else.

"Are you insane? Leave me alone. I'm tired," Michèle groaned.

Curling up again with her face in the pillow, she dropped off to sleep with amazing ease. Had I, who never dream, been dreaming? At first perhaps . . .

At first the room seemed to merge with the river. The

water was transparent, the current crossed through it and swayed all sorts of algae and marine life upon the rug: ribbons of gulfweed with blunt, spiny excrescences; horny corals; stonewort with broad sycamore-shaped fronds. Mingling with the carpet's tawny arabesques, this strange vegetation created a strange landscape, half vegetable, half organic. I saw a drowned man float by looking sober and remarkably thoughtful, dressed in black, with high-button shoes such as my mother's grandfather used to wear. A faint mossy bloom covered him from head to toe.

The table bordering the rug was secured by its four legs against the current, like an old woman standing in mid-stream, steadying herself on two poles. From under her skirts, tadpoles and young frogs leapt into the water to frolic among the algae. A bat peered out from behind the mortise joint of a beam above my bed. I noted its pointed ears, its almond-shaped eyes, its tiny teeth. It wriggled out of the crevice and hung upside down for a moment, clinging to the beam by its hind feet, then spread its wings, released its hold, and began to swoop about the room. Twice it collided with the doorjamb and alighted on the mantelpiece. It observed the drowned man rocking gently in the flowing carpet. With a faintly derisive little hiss—like an insect's laugh—it commented drily, winking at me, "That's peculiar, that's the second time I nearly broke my neck. I've got to get my radar adjusted."

Whereupon it dove up the chimney and out of sight.

Yes, that must have been a dream, or at least a series of

dreamlike images. For bats and frogs and seaweed, like shoe buttons, have peopled my secret universe since childhood. And it wasn't the first time I'd heard an insect laugh; my books are filled with such fancies.

But I *did* see her, suddenly, seconds after the fruit bat vanished with a series of sharp little clicks. It was no illusion; she was there, sitting on the end of the bench in her white cape, just as I saw her in the cemetery, clasping her gloved hands on crossed knees, dangling a white kid pump from the toe of her arched foot.

I say it was no illusion because I saw her eyes. Story-book eyes are the eyes of the dead. They look into the distance, somewhere far beyond you, allowing no exchange. In the room's faint early light, she really looked at me—how can I explain it?—her stare was alive. There was no mistaking its being alive.

In fact I wasn't surprised to find her there. The grounds are unfenced, the doors never locked, and my bedroom is on the ground floor. Normally I lament (though occasionally I enjoy) the fact that my place is as wide open as a barn. It wasn't the first time I'd found a strange woman in the house, sitting in a corner waiting for me. In the dead of night? Why not? I had every reason to think Mademoiselle B. eccentric.

That probably explains why, though captivated momentarily by this sudden but undeniable apparition, my mind leaped to a purely routine concern. The first words I said to her were, "Be careful or you'll tip over."

I know all too well the advantages and disadvantages

of the long wooden bench permanently installed in front of my writing table, on which I spend most of my time nowadays, with aching back and aching shoulders, to which I have strapped myself on occasion when facing a deadline for some urgent, difficult task. I know, for instance, that sitting down directly upon either leg will cause the bench to topple over according to a fundamental law of Archimedes. How many times have I hopped up suddenly, say to answer the phone in the kitchen, and sent some tiresome chatterbox sprawling on the floor midway through her tearful confession? Madame Fijutte, for one, my housekeeper, suffered this fate the first time she dropped in to pour out her woes. Ever since she's made it a practice never to sit next to me on my bench.

That night the first thing I noticed was that Mademoiselle B. perched on the very edge of the oak bench, well past its left leg. Probably she is not very heavy, and here again Archimedes informs us that the ratio between force A and its distance to the point of application B determines the force of a lever. Good heavens, though, Madame Fijutte weighs a feather . . . And my little Mona even less. Still . . .

Mademoiselle B. didn't answer. She continued to stare at me out of those icy, pupil-less eyes of hers. Placing a finger over her lips, she seemed to say, "Be quiet, don't make a sound, pretend I'm not here." Reaching to her feet into a needlepoint bag that was closed with a horn clasp, she drew out a dainty linen tea cloth clamped between two brass hoops, in the shape of an omega, made to fit one in-

side the other by adjusting a set of screws. Next she took out a spool of bright-colored cotton, threaded one end of it into a long needle, and began to embroider.

I gazed for some time in fascination at this cozy, somewhat archaic scene that might well have been painted by Greuze. I was afraid to move or speak. Gradually I grew accustomed to the silent, ultimately reassuring presence of this lady in white, who settled on my bench like a slender-limbed sandpiper.

Yet what surprised me most was that, even for sewing or to thread her needle, she never removed her gloves. I couldn't help recalling Quérolles' curious remark the day before: "No one in this neighborhood has ever laid eyes on that woman's hands."

How long did the embroidery session continue? How many cross-stitches, how many back-stitches did her needle perform? What kind of design was she shaping? What chain-stitched message? For whom? And why? I dared not ask, and wanted desperately to know. The question seemed utterly indiscreet, unpardonably perverse, yet was the key to so many mysteries.

Finally, I decided to wake Michèle. I felt sure that she, being less inhibited than I, would talk bluntly with the lady whom I'd been telling her about for months. I remembered that on the Sunday we had towed in the corpse, Michèle, with her customary forthrightness, had been the first to dispute the two policemen's instant and rather simplistic ver-

dict of suicide when I told her about it. Of course she was less involved in the matter than I, but given the opportunity she'd waste no time getting at the truth. This prospect must have displeased my visitor, for in the time it took me to rouse Michèle, she vanished as silently as she had come. When Michèle opened her eyes, there was no one on the bench.

It took me a while to get over my dismay and bewilderment. The contours of the room reverted to their normal disorder. The house was perfectly still. I burrowed under the covers and finally fell asleep, clutching Michèle hard as if clinging desperately to a life preserver. Just before dozing off—or was it just after?—I heard the rustle of wings in the fireplace and saw the fruit bat fly up to its hiding place behind the beam overhead.

Later that morning I busied myself at the desk doing nothing in particular: sharpening penknife and pencils, scraping away at my cuticles with a pair of scissor-tips. Actually, I was thinking over what had kept me awake last night and waiting for Michèle to stir, open her eyes and, in lieu of a good morning, demand her coffee.

Several hours passed.

At last, behind my back, I heard Michèle's first stirrings. I turned around. Her eyes opened, slowly at first, then blinked rapidly. "Where's my coffee?" she demanded in lieu of a good morning.

I went into the kitchen and returned with a round tray

and two steaming cups of coffee. I sat down on the edge of the bed, balancing the tray on my lap. Michèle sat up, propping herself against the pillow. Her bare breasts had sprung out of the sheets as from a linen closet. Yawning, she stretched her arms, her elbows bent backward, her armpits distended, sheltering their splendid clusters of dusky mint.

After one sip of coffee, she set the cup back on the tray. "Too hot," she grumbled.

"You're not in any rush. You might at least say good morning."

"Morning, love. Thanks, love," she parroted, with a fond tongue in cheek.

We get along fine. Still, the fact remains that we inhabit totally different mental worlds. If ever our "cozy twosome," as friends call it, should go up in smoke, the cause, oddly enough, will have to involve metaphysics. For it seems to me that a conflict over the problem of transcendence, let's say, or astral rivers, or reincarnation, is a far more adequate motive for divorce than ordinary adultery or the various sexual anomalies of the middle class. How many professors and high officials try to conceal the mediocrity of their professional and marital lives behind liaisons which they are determined to have "dangerous"; who assume, and ultimately are convinced they possess, a kind of erotic aura; who, by adopting the role of a Sade or a Laclos, cut themselves off from a wealth of affection while behaving like utter boors with their mistresses?

Cheered and revived by her first swallow of coffee, Michèle launched her anticipated assault on what she im-



mediately labeled my "nocturnal fantasies." I defended myself stoutly.

"Who's talking about fantasies? I tell you she was here, sitting on the bench . . ."

"And your sister who came calling on you once in the middle of the night?"

"My sister's at home in Névache, in those mountains of hers. She never stirs. The other one's in Johannesburg . . . But Mademoiselle B. lives only ten minutes away—and loves to walk; she told me so. You don't see much of her in the daytime, but at night, she gets around, I'm sure . . . We're not fenced in here; the door's always open. Nothing's impossible."

"Rubbish! Just because you dreamed that . . ."

"I never dream."

"That's what *you* think. You had a hankering for this dame; you tried to pick her up outside the cemetery and she told you where to get off. Served you right. You've been annoyed ever since. You think too much . . ."

"It isn't that simple."

"What do you call simple? Conversing with bats at midnight?"

"As far as the bat is concerned, I don't say . . . Though the house is full of them . . ."

"I've never seen one . . ."

"They're here all the same . . . I'll catch you one if you like, with a butterfly net."

"What I'd really like is for you to see the doctor. You're getting hopelessly neurotic. Besides, your books show it. Remember what J.B. called *Les Saisons*: "a bag of fanta-

sies"? Have a check-up, little lamb. Or else write a new book. Why don't you write the story of Mademoiselle B.?"

"What story? There is no story. Nothing to write. All I want to know or understand is why the guy drowned himself on her account."

"First of all, nothing proves that he drowned himself. The police decided that . . . A bit too hastily, I think. As for the relations between the alleged suicide and your lady friend . . ."

"Listen, Michèle, let's not begin the investigation all over again."

"What investigation? There never was anything even faintly resembling one. Rumors, gossip, hearsay, it's a bunch of nonsense—in your head. My advice is go over and screw your floozie and quit talking about it!"

I looked at Michèle in dismay—more than that, with a vague sense of terror. She must have thought her coffee sufficiently cooled after this tirade and began sipping it serenely.

Her solid common sense refused to be burdened with false problems. Yet something else preoccupied me: I couldn't help feeling, after such an incredible proposal, that Michèle was deliberately planning for me to die.

Once before, several years earlier, she had almost killed me—and herself in the bargain. It was on a winter night. We were driving back to Paris from the seashore in a little red ball of fire I had just bought and which seemed to be working fine.

“Dare you to smoke a cigarette!” Michèle would challenge as I revved up the motor to 6000 rpm’s. “To see if you can hold your speed.”

On that particular night Michèle was driving, one-handed as usual, of course. She keeps the other hand free to smoke with, and the third for combing her hair. We were doing over 100 on the deserted highway, so carefree and euphoric, chatting away at the top of our lungs without paying the slightest attention to the road.

At the entrance to some city whose name I don’t recall, Michèle headed into a hazardous Y-shaped intersection at full speed. Suddenly, death’s two round eyes loomed in front of the window: the headlights of a truck charging straight toward us. Nothing to do. Shut our eyes. Scream. Blanch

...

Had Michèle even seen it? I don’t know, I doubt it. But as I screamed she rammed down the accelerator and swerved to the left. We never touched. The road was empty. Death had panicked and switched tracks.

In retrospect, I think Michèle sensed the danger only through me, through the change in my expression, the strange gleam that settles in the eyes of everyone who has glimpsed, even for a second, the beyond.

It took her a good half-mile to come to a stop. She parked on the shoulder and shut off the engine. I climbed out of that car as if from the tomb, shaking all over, barely able to stand up. I took a few steps in the grass along the roadside and leaned against a slender birch tree. With fingers spread wide, I stroked its smooth white bark; then,

grasping the supple trunk in both hands, I shook it with all my might, loosening its last silvery leaves.

Michèle walked around the car and came toward me, smiling. The night made her luminous, beautiful, alive. Folding herself in my arms, she kissed me tenderly. "Poor dear, you're white as a sheet. Were you terribly frightened?"

I hugged her silently. Then she said something which made little impression at the time, though now I value it highly: "You take the wheel. Right away. Because if you don't, you'll never want to drive again."

I drove us home without incident, slowly at first, speeding up gradually as we neared Paris; discussing solemnly at first, then with increasing cheerfulness, an event which, after all, never actually took place. I still remember Michèle observing at some point, "When you get right down to it, killing you that way would be a really dirty trick, because you're happy, oddly enough. Life interests you. But to die that or any other way wouldn't make the slightest difference to me . . ."

At issue indeed, that morning, was my own death—and God knows what a horrifying death. Not, of course, to a logical, coherent mind like Michèle's, but certainly to mine. The tangle of information and testimony I had gathered about Mademoiselle B. led me to a single vague but agonizing conclusion: the men she enticed into her house, willingly or unwillingly, did not have long to live.

It happened to poor Maugendre, probably to my friend Aurélien as well, to Martine's father, to Dr. Bluche . . .

And what of the nameless bodies that turn up periodically in dams, the unidentified corpses discovered now and again in secluded thickets, the solitary night motorists who crash straight into a piling unaccountably . . . The local press is full of such alarming incidents. Baffled, the Viormes police hush them up. I remembered the knacker Rendu's tart comment, "Anyway, we know who's next . . ."

Well, it won't be me! The mere suggestion of running off to "screw that floozie," as Michèle had put it, filled me with the sort of alarm Michèle would have called superstition. Unlike Madame Fijutte, however, I haven't yet reached the stage where I try exorcising ghosts with the sign of the cross. Yet despite myself, despite my respect for science and Cartesian logic I feel compelled, in dealing with normal abnormalities and the inexplicable nature of people and things, to leave a door open into another possible world, to let my spirit roam the fascinating realms of the supernatural. Hardly a day passes when some commonplace reality, some basic manifestation of life—the emergence of a caterpillar, the coloring of an oyster, the oxydizing of a metal cup—fails to strike me as a fantastic, marvelous adventure. Too much mystery surrounded the appearances and legends of the enigmatic "white lady" for me not to fear that some haphazard act of mine might inflict unknown and irreparable evils upon myself. No, I believe neither in God nor the Devil, but am inclined to think that somewhere in the world there are persons, ostensibly human, with powers beyond those of ordinary mortals or the basic laws of nature. Every-

thing led me to believe that Mademoiselle B. was one such person.

The following Monday, I cruelly wakened Michèle before dawn, and so, against all expectations, she caught her train on the run. Once isn't forever! As I waited at the level crossing, she leaned out the coach window waving frantically at me, shouting hysterically into the wind, "My notebooks! I forgot my notebooks! On the bedroom mantel!"

The train picked up speed and vanished around the bend skirting the river, carrying off Michèle's radiant, panic-stricken face.

"There goes my day," I thought, climbing back into the car. I'd have to return home, pick up the forgotten notebooks—which inevitably would not be on the bedroom mantel but instead on the toilet shelf in the bathroom, or beside the kitchen stove, or somewhere in the garden—and rush them over to Michèle's office on the Rue de Lübeck, Paris XVI . . . Proof of devotion, right? We'd end up lunching together—and would surely plan to take in the new Ken Russell film, giving me an excuse to drop by the Film Center, then we'd wander around Montparnasse in the evening, and Michèle would say, "You're a louse if you leave me now." So I'd sleep a sleepless night in her glass and aluminum apartment that twinkled with city lights. Anyway, the next day I'd have to get some money from my publishers. Then there was the lunch we'd promised to have with Suzon . . . In fact, I had enough to do for a whole week.

Circumstances decreed otherwise. Adieu Paris, Michèle, Suzon, Ken Russell.

I was already rolling down the slope to my house when a car edged out of the turn and began climbing toward me. At once I recognized Quérolles' two-toned Simca.

Two cars cannot pass on this narrow lane dipping down to the river. As Quérolles had started up last, I assumed that he would coast back to the level turn and then join me at the house. No, he kept climbing. He switched on his headlights, he honked his horn, he lowered a window and waved me back imperiously. I retreated up the rise and waited at the top. Before I had a chance to question him, he ordered, "Leave your car; we'll take mine."

"What do you mean? What's up?"

"You'll find out. I hear it's not very pretty."

I hopped in beside him on the battered front seat. The clutch slipped, the gears skidded, the brakes slid. The ancient Simca jolted through town at a murderous pace and out onto the old Vaudeville road.

It was a beautiful clear morning. Red poppies devoured the wheat fields; poplars and wych-elms spread their dense foliage against the sky, proclaiming the triumph of summer.

Quérolles said nothing, gripping the wheel with his sweater sleeves rolled up. His brows were bushy, his forehead furrowed like a dissident ram.

Where was he taking me with such precipitous, mute obstinacy? When he turned sharply onto the dike road, I grew panicky. Would he dare to deposit me on the lady's doorstep? "Say, where are you taking us?" I demanded.

Instead of answering, he jerked his chin, perhaps to indicate "That way, straight ahead." And on he drove, boldly guiding his old rattletrap along the road lined with elms and tall grasses. I couldn't make him stop, I couldn't get out and walk. Through the dusty windshield I soon saw directly in front of us Antonin's narrow house, the former gatekeeper's dwelling where Mademoiselle B. lives. No doubt that was where we were heading. To do what? To see what? Quérolles had warned me that it wouldn't be a pretty sight. A wave of horror engulfed me as I visualized our discovery of the lady's rotting corpse. Strangled? Disemboweled? Decapitated? Devoured by rats?

At the same time, the past night's tranquil images reappeared to me, the white lady with the pale smile sitting on my bench, silently engrossed in her needlework. Was this dream of mine, since it had to be a dream, a premonition of some dreadful tragedy?

I trembled. There were knots in my stomach. I prepared for the worst. But like Dante choosing Virgil for his guide to the underworld, I had put myself in the hands of Quérolles, who kept staring straight ahead, oddly silent.

"Here we are," I thought resignedly as the Simca jolted up to the house. In the morning sunshine it seemed less forbidding than on the rainy November night when I first saw it. At best, one might take it for a placid suburban abode sorely in need of weeding. Then I remembered little Martine's entreaty, "Don't go!" But I'd gone all the same . . .

To my amazement—and infinite relief—I realized that



Quérolles wasn't stopping. We drove right by the house, traversed the "dike" by way of the old grade crossing, and plunged on, through clouds of dust, down the winding descent toward the Viormes woods. Totally baffled now, I had no heart to question him.

"You see we have company," Monsieur Max said at last.

A dozen or so vehicles were parked on both sides of the road at the edge of the woods. Bikes and motorcycles lay on their sides in the grass under clumps of broom. The whole town had turned out. In the jumble of cars I instantly picked out the fire brigade's bright red engine—not the jeep that had fished out the body at my place, but a spanking new hook-and-ladder truck. I spotted the black police van with its flashing turret light. The local ambulance had made a U-turn and stood obliquely in the roadway, doors open and waiting.

Quérolles drew up behind the car of Monsieur Vineuse, the schoolmaster. We jumped out and joined the group of townspeople who had hurried up to a grassy knoll at the forest's edge. Rendu came to greet us, shaking my hand and whispering to his friend Max, "It's hands off everything till the judge gets here."

The state forest of Viormes is one of the loveliest in the region, a place of great beauty chiefly because of its rich variety of trees and the rampant wilderness of its timber which never in human memory has known the ax. There are tall, leafy young trees, century-old oaks and beeches,

groves of sapling birches, clusters of evergreen pines and spruces that thrive in the sandy soil. The underbrush, a mass of fern and barberry, is even denser than the timber, making the forest interior impenetrable, as hunters who've watched game melt out of sight well know.

The man was hanging from the main bough of an oak on the fringe of the woods. He dangled fairly high above the ground, from a thin rope roughly ten feet long. The impact must have been shattering. The body rocked gently in the breeze, or rather swiveled slowly back and forth like a fat black sausage strung up to smoke over the fire. He was a man around forty. He seemed to be almost swimming in his clothes, as if his suit had suddenly outgrown him. Yet his fingers protruded from the coatsleeves, puffed and purple. Sudden death must have caused his feet to retract, for one shoe had dropped into the grass, leaving a sock suspended from the trouser leg.

The noose, oddly enough, had slipped down under his chin, thrusting the head backward and tilting it slightly to the right. His eyes were rolling; his tongue, which seemed to have doubled in volume, gushed from a mouth caked with thick, frothy spittle.

No, it was not a pretty sight. But even more repugnant to us on the grassy slope facing the great oak was the swirling mass of insects crawling over the cadaverous face, devouring the eyes, the ears, the nasal cavities, plundering the unctuous saliva from mouth and tongue as if it were nectar. There were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, droning

in the morning silence like the rhythmical throbbing of an electrical pump.

“The hornets have taken over,” Rendu whispered.

No one said a word. Transfixed by the ghastly scene, the villagers stared in awesome silence as if witnessing a state execution. I myself felt death’s insidious breath stirring the leaves.

Death danced along the boughs of the oak, whipped through the underbrush, retreated into the depths of the forest, returning with the hornets to caress the dead man’s face, to murmur blandishments in his ear, to distill its icy poison in his veins: “You sought me . . . you found me . . . See, you remembered our appointment in the forest . . .”

The firemen had gone back to their truck and sat on the benches awaiting orders. The policemen paced up and down in the grass, hands clasped behind them. Sunlight flooded the clearing. The hornets’ hum grew deafening.

From the dike road at last came the sound of a motor. Court officials arrived in a black Peugeot. Judge Frétigny got out first, followed by a police officer and the medical examiner. The gendarmes and firemen advanced to meet them. Greeting each other in silence, the group walked down to the clearing.

Frétigny wasted no time contemplating the dangling man; he saw what he had to see. He must have given some rapid orders, for at a signal from the police, the red truck began rolling toward the oak tree as the firemen cranked away at the ladder.

The little judge strutted before his audience. You could tell a mile away that he was a reactionary. The angle of his hat—a hat, mind you, and here it was August!—the way he held his gloves in one hand—leather gloves, in August!—his costly wool suit, and his striped shirt and tie, immediately betrayed him as a bourgeois representative of the establishment and a class enemy to the citizens of Jouff, who hob-nob happily with the local police. I felt much closer to them than to him.

Now it so happens that Frétigny had attended the Lycée Blaise Pascal in Clermont-Ferrand during the war, which made him my classmate. I never knew him too well and had lost track of him in the interval. But since such singular circumstances had brought us together again, he was eager to crow about our “boyhood friendship,” to keep me out of trouble with the law, and to impress me with his patronage. Worse still, he invited me to dinner along with the public prosecutor and his wife, to talk about books!

One of the first cases he had to deal with in our jurisdiction involved a delinquent young girl named Karina who was plagued with the misfortune of being both a minor and hopelessly rebellious, and whose mischief-making swelled the local press columns. I had met Karina one boring summer when I was spending my evenings in local coffee houses, lively places popular among the young working people in town. Now I’m not exactly immune to the charms of youth and of independent minds and morals, and, as I subsequently explained to the examining magistrate, I was

not totally unfamiliar with the revels and minor offenses of charming Karina.

“You realize, I hope, that I could indict you,” Frétigny assured me in his thin, shrill voice.

He did nothing of the sort, in deference to literature and the Lycée Blaise Pascal, but had no compunctions about packing my girl friend Karina off to the reformatory, between two gendarmes, at the request of none other than her parents.

He lost no opportunity to remind me of this infamy, for which he seemed to take credit, implying always that he would rather have been in my shoes than his own.

Such is the dubious prestige accorded by such people to the literary profession. To judges, administrative officials, and teachers, all inhibited by the rules of their particular game, interested only in advancing their own careers and salaries, a writer is first cousin to an irresponsible brat, an outlaw, a semi-delinquent. Oh yes, a seducer above all, architect of broken homes and wayward young women.

Anxiously following the lurching fire truck, I soon found myself steps away from Judge Frétigny. He came toward me gushing cordiality, which under the circumstances struck me as particularly compromising. “Say, Pons,” he began in that shrill soprano of his (and I hate to be called Pons as if I were still in school or in the army), “what brings you here?”

Having made it a professional practice to ask and answer questions in the same breath, he continued in a whis-

per, nodding in the direction of the dangling corpse, "Another of your victims, eh? Another hardworking family man you've pushed to the wall!"

The idea was so unpleasant, so insidious, and the man so odious for saying it, that I turned on my heel and rejoined Quérolles and the villagers.

By now the firemen had stationed their truck at the foot of the oak tree and were raising the ladder toward the dead man. A young fellow in boots and black leather jacket climbed up. Just as he reached the body, he began to flail his arms wildly and scurried back down the ladder. The hornets had no intention of surrendering their prize; a battle was imminent, a costly one. The fireman had been stung on the right hand and above one eye. His eyelid was swelling rapidly as he bellowed, "Damn bugs! Shit! Ouch! I'll whip the tail off that bastard up there!"

People crowded around him and offered their home cures for wasp bites, everything from the application of raw potato halves to letting blood from ear lobes. The medical examiner, who happened to have brought his satchel, proceeded at once to extract the dart which was visibly imbedded underneath the swollen skin. He succeeded ultimately in transforming a sting into an open sore upon which he clamped a wad of cotton soaked in boric acid. "Better let it come to a head," he advised, "the stinger will work its way out. I'll give you some aspirin."

During this interval the body continued to rock gently to and fro among the branches. The hornets, still command-

ing the field, went on plundering the mouth.

“Well, let’s get on with it,” urged the judge, mustering all the authority his castrato range would emit. “I’m still waiting for you to pack up this puppet show.” He looked out over his audience with a self-satisfied grin, drumming the leather gloves against his palm.

The fire chief was baffled. He’d had his share of hornet or wasp nests in the past, of responding to the call of helpless farmers’ wives or frantic Parisian families who cast themselves as heroes of a weekend tragedy. More than once he had lowered his net over throbbing clusters of insects weighing as much as six or eight pounds. But such colonies usually are sufficiently well-bred to congregate in chimneys where it’s easy to smoke them out, or in equally accessible barn rafters. What preposterous perversity could have motivated this swarm to settle on a slimy wreck dangling from an ancient oak ten feet above the ground? The problem was not simple, and the squad, summoned to perform a specific task, had not come equipped to handle additional complications. If they could bring the truck into the clearing, he speculated, maybe they could use the ladder to get at the body from behind. But did abstract concepts of front and back mean anything to a horde of rampaging hornets? The squad had lost one man already; would another volunteer step forward and expose himself to their fury without protective netting?

Rendu chose this moment to offer his services. Once again Jouff’s knacker revealed himself the hero of the hour.

After dismissing the big red engine and its pitiful ladder with a scornful wave, he proceeded calmly to remove first one hobnailed boot and then the other. In stocking feet and with surprising agility, he first scaled a tall linden with low-slung branches; from the linden he made his way to the oak where, straddling the main limb, he inched his way along until he was perched not more than twenty feet higher and directly above the dangling body. He seemed to know the way by heart. All he did, probably, was to retrace the dead man's trail, having calculated that the length of the rope would keep him safe from, if not beyond the reach of, the hornets, which in fact never attack humans unless threatened.

At this point, observers on the ground were wondering how Rendu planned to lower the body. Wasting no time, and without a thought for convention or legality, he drew a penknife from his pocket and began sawing away at the rope.

The judge frowned and winced, manifestly offended by this procedure. Yet what could he do? Everyone was silent, all eyes glued to the tree. The hornets suspected nothing.

The dead man plummeted straight down, landing upright on his feet. He had on only one shoe—a fact we all had noticed. The impact doubled him over into a heap, like a disjointed marionette whose strings are released all at once. His buckling knees seemed to tuck under his chin, his spinal column to fold up like a collapsing accordion. By now he was a shapeless mound of rags, coiled on the



ground in a fetal position, face down, arms flung backward. The swarm of hornets, many of which must have been crushed by his fall, took to the air from every direction with a strident whirr, racing for the treetops or wheeling above the ground, swirling around bushes, around cars, around people.

They were everywhere, spreading panic. Villagers, judge, police and firemen took to their heels, dashing wildly to the cars, shrieking, flailing their arms, wrapping their heads with clothing.

The fury ended abruptly. As if in response to a signal, the insects executed an orderly retreat and regrouped into a compact mass; with unerring persistence they then settled back on the swollen, bloodstained head of the mangled corpse beneath the oak tree.

"If he wasn't dead already, he certainly is now," the medical examiner observed archly.

In the presence of so many witnesses, however, his remark was insufficient evidence on which to issue a proper death certificate. He needed further access to the body.

"I wouldn't mind torching the whole swarm," the fire chief volunteered, "except the guy would burn too and you couldn't identify him. Anyway, the woods are a tinderbox at this time of year . . ."

After a brief conference, a fireman went to fetch an extinguisher from the truck, returning with helmet, gloves, and a handkerchief tied around his face just below the eyes. He strode boldly to within a few feet of the pulsating corpse, halted with feet planted far apart, flipped his weapon

upside down, and delivered a stream of carbonic foam at the swarm.

You would think the dead man had sprung to life again, a life perhaps less organic than mineral, like the sudden petrification of African slaves immortalized in lava at Pompeii. He puffed up and boiled over, he exhaled a sinister cloud of bubbles that burst one by one and from each of which it seemed a tiny soul was escaping.

I expected the body to be entirely consumed, and to vanish from sight. Instead it pursued its piteous effervescent mutation, that grievous transition from a natural death to a chemical one. I am convinced that I saw an arm twitch in one final agonized spasm.

This time the hornets got their comeuppance. Survivors of the onslaught swarmed up and over the treetops. The black cloud soon vanished into the sky, high among the planets. The majority, drowned, asphyxiated, burned, or corroded, were reduced to a mound of inert legs and wings trickling down the dead man's scalp, past his ears and chin. With his boot, the fireman squashed a few stragglers who were dragging themselves through the grass with crushed wings glued to their sides. They were giant insects, some nearly two inches long.

At last the body could be turned over and stretched out. The face was beyond recognition. At least no one seemed to know who the man was.

The doctor approached and declared him dead. The police approached to search for identification. They found nothing: no papers, no money, no photo in the coat or

trousers. The only clue was a sheet of squared paper folded in four in the shirt pocket. Written on it with a ball-point pen in clumsy, childish letters were the words: NO PUBLISSITY PLEESE

PUBLISSITY—with those two s's! When Sergeant Clairout slipped me the note after unfolding it in his broad ruddy fingers, I was stunned. No doubt about it: the same hand had penned both this strange posthumous message and the anonymous one sent to the Viornes police station six months earlier, the message which had led us, one Sunday in spring, to a man drowned on the banks of the Flanne . . . Same paper, same writing, same spelling.

I was stunned but afraid to say anything. Clairout himself kept silent as he tucked the piece of paper into his notebook and snapped the elastic band. Did he remember the other business? Had he also made this tenuous but alarming connection?

Drawing apart from the others, I began to walk in circles on the grass, palms pressed against my temples—an absurd gesture I tend to repeat whenever my head starts to churn. I wasn't bent on competing with Inspector Maigret, but between the drowning and the hanging, between two comparable human wreckages which circumstances had forced me to examine at close range, I could not fail to perceive a baffling association. Better still—or worse—a kind of fraternal complicity in death, a contest of despair and horror, as if each had intended his final torment to symbolize the raw, vindictive, willful destruction of life and hope.

What common curse had so crippled their spirit as to compel this savage self-mutilation, this erasure of their human image? What encounter, what dread obsession had driven them down woodland paths to secret altars of agonized expiation? Impossible to know; yet impossible to doubt any longer that at some crucial point in their destinies loomed the forbidding house of Mademoiselle B.

I was vexed at myself for succumbing to the romance of Gothic castles—especially when in this case the castle turned out to be a sadly prosaic gatekeeper's lodging abandoned by the defunct Paris-Orléans railway company.

Still, I was beginning to think that the dark and—I might as well say it—"sinister" forces governing the destinies of certain creatures and demanding their sudden destruction could probably adapt to such a cheerless abode, whose tenant was merely their agent.

At this point in my musings I met up with Rendu, whom everyone seemed more or less to have forgotten. He had climbed down from the tree and laced on his boots. I felt certain that this uneducated but resourceful fellow, receptive to all the mysteries of life in the country, knew far more than he appeared to know about the whole business. If anyone could untangle the riddle of Mademoiselle B. for me, surely it was he.

He stood alone and watched, with hands shoved into his pockets and a wry look on his face, as Judge Frétigny and the police bustled around the body. With manifest revulsion, a gloved fireman attempted to loosen the noose. Am-

balance attendants stood by to load the corpse on a stretcher.

“Sure likes to talk that judge,” Rendu muttered through his teeth without turning around, as I walked up. “He’d have been smarter to climb the tree with me.”

“Up there in the tree?” I repeated foolishly. “What for?”

“Certain things you can see above you can’t see below.”

What did he mean? I was furious. His laconic answers coupled with his inflexibility were driving me wild. Not to mention his way of seeming to know just a little more than everyone else, his vague, uncertain intimations. “Certain things! Things! What kind of things?” I snapped.

Rendu shrugged his shoulders condescendingly. “Climb up yourself if you’re interested. It’s easy if you start from the linden.”

For a moment I felt nailed to the ground. I could hardly visualize myself shimmying up trees like a bare-kneed youngster to amuse the townspeople and irritate Judge Frétigny. And probably all for nothing. It was just like Rendu to put me up to some stunt that he and his pal Max could snicker about later. But what did it matter? I knew that because I’d been short with him, Rendu wouldn’t say another word. And there was always the chance that his advice might prove rewarding. If one could really see things from up there . . . What things? God, how I wanted to know!

I wandered off slowly so as not to invite attention, though in fact not a soul watched me. Everyone was crowding around the ambulance attendants, who had covered the

body with a blanket and were setting it on a stretcher as gingerly as a young mother-to-be. I skirted the clearing at the edge of the woods, and approached the linden through the undergrowth.

Like the dead man, like Rendu, I hoisted myself up into the tree, branch by branch. From the linden the oak was indeed easy to reach.

The view changes once you leave the ground. Below, in the clearing, the villagers flocked around the stretcher and the hospital's white Citroën ambulance; beyond lay the tangle of parked cars in the grass. I made a mental note that filming such a scene with wide-angle zoom shots in the sharp morning light could give it epic dimensions. But then, I hadn't crawled up there to make films . . .

I surveyed the people, the ground, the trees, the branches, searching anxiously for some clue to the "thing" that had caught Rendu's eye and that made the climb, he assured, more than worth while. I peered at every blade of trampled grass, like those archaeologists who fly the deserts of South America scanning the sands for signs of lost cities and temples invisible at eye level. Apparently it wasn't the right angle, for I saw nothing odd on the ground. I continued climbing.

When I reached the tree's main fork, my field of vision suddenly opened up, and silhouetted against the leaves—why hadn't I thought of it!—over beyond the dike road, on the far side of the grade crossing, rose the slate-color roof of Mademoiselle B.'s house.

That had to be it then, the "thing" you couldn't see

from below but was clearly visible from above. With trembling heart, I gripped the linden's branches. Slowly, step by step, with energy born of determination, I was able to hoist myself up parallel to where the body had dangled. The whole house stood out now, its four high windows set in a narrow facade. And whom did I see directly in front of me through the branches? Mademoiselle B. herself, upstairs at an open window.

As there was no purpose in transferring to the oak, I settled myself astride a crook in the linden, with one hand braced against its rough bark, and paused to contemplate the intriguing sight. No doubt she couldn't see me through the dense foliage. Or, if she could, she appeared untroubled by my presence. Dressed in her usual pale, diaphanous garments, she leaned on the balcony railing with her elbows, chin cupped in one hand, as calmly as if she were watering her plants. She was hatless, and with her hair tumbling about her shoulders like a cluster of snowballs, she reminded me of those bewigged ladies painted by the Old Masters. Though I couldn't discern her features, I had the impression that she looked rather pleased.

No, she didn't see me. But she must have watched Rendu climbing into the oak. She must have watched him take out his knife and sever the noose; she must have watched the body hurtle to the ground. Worse, I had every reason to think she had watched, unflinching, from the same choice seat while the poor wretch hanged himself.

Why speak of chance or coincidence? There could be no doubt that he had deliberately chosen, of all the branches

on all the trees in all the woods of our district, to hang himself from the fork of this oak and no other, in this remote place and in plain view of the lady's window. It was obvious that he had chosen to writhe and die before her eyes, in punitive, accusing torment.

"No publicity" was his request to the villagers who would discover his mangled body. But between himself and this woman he had taken care, with infinitely refined cruelty, to make things crystal clear. I hated to think what dreadful dialogue, what cries had been exchanged across the heath, in the luminous silence of a summer morning, between this frantic man with a noose about his neck and the white lady at her window. What word, what sign, what gesture had he vainly awaited before leaping to his death?

Below, the hospital attendants had loaded the stretcher into the ambulance and left for the morgue, taking the medical examiner along. The townspeople began to disperse in small groups, returning to their bicycles and cars. There was nothing for me to do but descend from my perch and find Quérolles so that we could drive back to town. I stood up on my branch.

I took one last look at the house. The lady still stood at the window. Apparently she hadn't moved. But just then she did, straightening up suddenly, raising one hand to her face, and in that hand, as best I could see, she seemed to be holding by its handle a small metal and glass instrument which sparkled in the sun. A mirror? Or perhaps, blurred



as it was, a pair of opera glasses through which to peer at me.

What a nerve! But also what a confession! If she had kept binoculars at hand, maybe even *in* hand, since day-break, this indicated not untimely curiosity, but criminal premeditation.

Beneath her stare, I felt like an intruder caught in the act. Down the tree I clambered, lurching from branch to branch, leaping breathless onto the ground. Quérolles and Rendu were waiting for me at the car.

The dismay on my face prompted the usual sarcasm. "Finally got a look at your girl friend, huh? How'd you make out?" Rendu sneered.

Without answering, I got into the back seat and slammed the Simca's door. The two men climbed in front and Quérolles started the motor. Cars were pulling out from every direction, heading back to Jouff. Vineuse, the schoolmaster, waved to me.

"Now are you convinced?" Quérolles asked. "You've heard it from everyone. That woman deals in death."

"Do you know who the man was?"

Frétigny walked by the car, talking to the Viormes police chief and his deputies. Seeing me inside, he came over to the window and said, "Drop by the courthouse some time, will you? I'll be there all during August. I have a few questions to ask you."

Quérolles drove off slowly. Looking straight ahead, he told me, "If you want some advice, Monsieur Pons, don't

get too involved in this business. It'll only bring you trouble."

On the dike road, beyond the grade crossing, a crowd had gathered in front of the lady's house. Stout Rosa, the mother of at least seven and always another on the way, stood holding her bicycle. Raging like a bull, fist pummeling the air, hair flying, she cursed the "witch," the "whore," urging her neighbors to do likewise.

And just as we passed slowly by, she stooped down in the midst of the group, still holding fast to the handlebars, picked up a stone and hurled it against the iron door shutter.

The act was not repeated. With the judge and the police close at heel, the good citizens of Jouff were unprepared for a stoning. Quérolles shifted into second and stepped on the gas.

"Good Lord!" I thought suddenly, "Michèle's notebooks!"

The end of summer passed uneventfully. Friends were touring the globe, playing “peninsular explorer”—would-be Vasco da Gamas, only four centuries too late. Almost daily, with mailbag slung over her shoulder and beret tilted over one ear, the postwoman proudly handed me postcards from Finistère, the Peloponnesus, Bangkok, Lima . . . Nowadays, peninsulas are fairly well equipped, and my explorer friends were camping out in luxurious airports, waiting hour after hour, day after day, for the arrival of some promised charter . . . René traveled as far as China, sending greetings from Peking decorated with bright revolutionary stamps. Ah, vacations!

Michèle went off to America. I traced her progress from week to week and state to state. “Fine!” she penned cryptically with the tip of a ball-point next to the tip of some Sixth Avenue skyscraper. She rode helicopters over Manhattan, Boeings to Los Angeles, cable cars in San Francisco; she cruised Colorado’s canyons in self-propelling canoes, Lake Pontchartrain on water skis; she gambled and won in Las Vegas, then spent all her winnings in the kitchenware bazaars of Michigan. She rented an Impala convertible and managed to total it the first day out. She seemed happy and so was I. That’s the way I like to travel: within my own

four walls, through Michèle's inevitably startling picture postcards.

If I were truly enterprising I'd open a new kind of travel agency to take people anywhere on the globe—through imagination and by proxy. No fuss, no formalities, no charge, no baggage . . . But I've already said that I'm not enterprising.

My car, also vacationing and in eccentric hands, sat waiting for a gasket in an Istanbul garage. With no likelihood of seeing it soon, I managed well without it, tramping the countryside on wooded paths.

August's triumph ushered in a warm, dry spell. Each year I look forward eagerly to the end of summer: the season of my birth, that special "moment" in our hemisphere when the sun regularly passes through the sixth zodiacal sign, between solstice and equinox. For nature, each day introduces a new stage of the journey; and for me as well.

Early each morning I went out to meditate by my favorite tree.

It's a horizontal poplar, the only one of its kind, and I'm very attached to it. When still a sapling, it was uprooted during a storm. I found it lying on the ground one morning at the far end of the meadow. In falling, it seemed to have bent over to protect its tender leaves. It was still quivering, gravely injured but determined to live. I did everything I could. Instead of setting it back on its stump, I lay cartloads of rich earth at its feet, covering its frail, gaping roots under a mound of humus. One by one, I staunched its wounds and

pruned its boughs. I cleared its bed of parasite shrubs.

It endured a painful winter at the mercy of snow, hail, and frost. But the following spring, from the roots on up through every bough, the sap surged upwards. Saved. The tree began to sprout new shoots, tender buds and leaves. It's never stopped. Season after season it blossoms and thrives, lying in the grass, a proud, living challenge to the supremacy of the vertical vegetable kingdom.

Heeding my own instinct and Rendu's advice, I let the month of August go by without appearing at the courthouse; nor had Frétnigny seen fit to summon me. Still, the hanging incident was uppermost in my thoughts.

No one seemed ever to have laid eyes on the man. His physical description failed to coincide with any recent report turned in to the bureau of missing persons. His fingerprints matched none of those belonging to assorted delinquents in the police files. It would have been possible of course to study his dental structure, to trace the source of his clothes, his watch, or his shoes. But Sergeant Clairout had grown disheartened and kept falling back on the same old argument: "Might as well face it, we don't have the money or the staff." As far as I knew, he hadn't even followed up the note found in the dead man's shirt pocket.

The body, in a plain pine box supplied by the morgue, now rested alongside many others in what is conventionally and erroneously known as the "community grave" in the Viormes cemetery.

It was then that a strange letter reached the police

urging, indeed demanding, the body's immediate transfer to another grave site. Bearing the gold seal and arms of the archdiocese—a Jerusalem cross with a lamb—the letter was signed personally by Mgr. Eugène Vontron du Clam, suffragan bishop.

Now according to French law, cemeteries are communal property; the communes alone derive income from them. The prefect, however, is empowered to set burial fees and to administer the budget. It's not hard then to imagine the bureaucratic skulduggery—not to mention the bribery—that must go on behind the scenes. A well-located cemetery, adjacent to an important commercial center, represents as valuable a piece of property per square foot as a parking lot, and far easier to manage. That's why no Frenchman will ever be allowed to choose his own hole in the ground, as I would much prefer doing, in his own back yard or under a favorite tree. Yet how pleasant it would be to invite friends and aging relatives over for their last holiday: what wild bridge sessions could go on *in aeternum*, grave to grave, beneath the sod!

In this respect and many others (for it's no secret how nuns obtain their driver's licenses), the religious establishment manages to circumvent the law and to enjoy exorbitant privileges preserved from the days of St. Benedict of Murcia. Unless the public welfare is threatened, every monastery has the right to possess its own private burial grounds where no law officer, judge, or local gravedigger ever dares set foot. Actually, the monks prefer to man their own shovels and bury their own dead. On occasion, they will lend

a helping hand to the nunneries, where there is always plenty of spadework and the gravediggers are referred to decorously as “gardeners.” It’s an old tale by now that after the war, in bombed-out nunnery cloisters, garden cemeteries were found littered with the bones of fetuses and male infants whose birth was never reported to any civil registry office . . .

In any event, on receipt of this louring letter from Mgr. Vontron, Sub-Prefect Périllat, who was in the habit of temporizing, temporized.

Like so many of his colleagues currently stepping into fairly important government posts, Périllat had entered the Ministry of the Interior some thirty years earlier, around 1942. He had obeyed German orders and requisitions during the Occupation, then Gaullist instructions on the eve of the Liberation. After a short proconsular stint in one of the colonies euphemistically known as a “department,” he was shifted to Algeria where he bowed to the decrees of the military high command. An exemplary civil servant and family man, he named his first son Philippe (for Pétain) and the second Charles (for de Gaulle). His wife had just given birth to a daughter named Claude (for Madame Pompidou).

Périllat was perpetually mystified as to why his shining example of obedience did not yield a bumper crop of oak leaves on his kepi. It infuriated him to reflect periodically that he might end his days as a mere sub-prefect on the provincial level and never rise beyond the rank of Chevalier in the Legion of Honor. “Ah, not even the ribbon!” he

would lament, privately, upon the pillow of Stéphanie or Brigitte. In fairness to the Administration, however, it ought to be said that Périllat's submissiveness went hand in hand with his unnerving stupidity.

He decided, for example, in response to the suffragan bishop's insistence on exhuming the body in strict secrecy, to dispatch a confidential message to every local department head, to the cemetery's and the morgue's administrators, and of course to his superiors, for the express purpose of insuring their own silence as well. In no time the news was all over the county. Perched on their swivel stools at the switchboard, Brigitte and Stéphanie flung it about with the delicacy of champion bowlers devastating an alley. "Can you believe it? Your hanging man turns out to be a priest!" they announced to me in a gale of laughter.

Lack of information ultimately brought investigators and the public to this equivocal conclusion: the suicide in the Viormes woods, whose identity no one could discover, was most probably a churchman, since the church was claiming his remains. And though the law called it suicide, the church still wanted to bury him in hallowed ground. This was big news.

In fact when a strange hearse appeared at dusk on the appointed day outside the Viormes cemetery to receive the freshly exhumed coffin, the numerous passersby, duly alerted, who just happened to be strolling at nightfall in this deserted spot, and the numerous gendarmes dispatched by the sub-prefect to keep spectators moving and the operation proceeding in strictest secrecy, all noticed two canons



in civilian dress in the front seat of the hearse, each with a small silver cross pinned to the lapel of his black coat.

They were watching through the windshield as negotiations progressed between the undertaker's deputy and the cemetery's custodian. With no need for them to intervene, they simply sat there as the box was lifted up and loaded into the hearse. But they were the ones seen furtively handing out bills through the window to the gravedigging crew which had been promised overtime for the job. And this act, more than any other, left a profound impression on the throng of spectators, it being a rare occurrence in the countryside for priests to hold out their hands to give rather than receive.

As for me, though informed along with everyone else of the date and hour of the abduction, I had decided not to go, allegedly because my car was out of commission in Istanbul. It didn't matter anyway. A young reporter on the *Viermes Dépêche* did precisely what I would have done had I been there. Behind the wheel of his red Renault "4L," he pursued the hearse boldly along dark country roads. He followed it through sleeping Viezelles and Amfre, up the narrow valley of the Armelle, and watched it disappear through the iron gates, which opened and promptly clanged shut, of the Dominican Abbey of Saint-Aubin-de-Chalaroppe.

The editor of the *Dépêche* was wise enough not to invite trouble from the police or the diocese by printing such a savory item. Instead, he brought it, piping hot, to me. This aspiring young journalist and I have been on excellent terms for some time now. I introduced him to François Truffaut

when he came here, years after making *Les Mistons*, to film some scenes for *Jules and Jim* in our area. He also got to photograph, here in my own back yard, Miguel Angel Asturias three days after the Nobel Prize award, and sold the photos to *Paris-Match*. Ever since, we've been playing "scoop" together.

He came back exhilarated that night from his jaunt to Saint-Aubin. Roaring down the road, he skidded to a halt on the gravel driveway, leaped out of the car, breathless and dishevelled, shouting, "I've got a scoop! It's sensational! The man who hanged himself in Viormes is a priest!"

"Some scoop! The town's been talking of nothing else for the past three days," I retorted.

"Yes, but now I have proof," he insisted. "The proof is that he's a Dominican from Saint-Aubin. I was over there; I've just come back."

We sat down at the kitchen table with a bottle of Bacardi between us while he described his investigation in great detail, from the arrival at police headquarters of the episcopal letter on down to the gates of the Abbey of Saint-Aubin clanging shut on the hearse. "Unfortunately, I can't do a thing with the information. But how about you?"

"Me? What would you have me do with it? I'm no reporter."

"That's just the point: you can write what you want. Where you want. You can even write a book."

Surely a conspiracy was afoot. People are impossible! Just because they don't write themselves, they think we have only to consult the daily columns of *France-Soir* for an in-

exhaustible supply of "subjects for novels"; that a quick hike in the country will provide "sources of inspiration." At that rate, every last citizen would be an author: there would be 40,000 or 400,000 in France instead of forty.

"Ah, but inspiration is the air you breathe!" How many times have I heard this humbug from the mouths of academics, second-hand auto dealers, "information experts" . . . Lifting their eyes to poplar tips swaying in the wind against the sky. Ah, Lamartine! What a fable! What rubbish! Nobody knows or cares to know what slavish persistence one must muster in pursuit of idleness, what restraint, what intense self-discipline in order to keep from writing every day. And through what timid gropings a soul may succeed sometimes in exposing itself. "Your pages, your pages!" Madame Bernanos used to remind Georges every day.

I felt in no mood to discuss problems of literary creation with this bearded, glib reporter. Instead, I tried to shunt him onto topics that really interested me. "A book, eh? You're quite a card. But there's no plot, nothing. First you'd need to find out who the guy is—priest or what have you—and why he wanted to hang himself. Why, contrary to doctrine, the church reclaims this suicide. And if he lived at Saint-Aubin, why he chose to come all the way over here to hang himself."

The reporter didn't have the answers but was genuinely curious and determined to investigate on his own. He would return to the abbey for more information and keep me advised. I encouraged him but stopped short of steering him onto the trail I had been exploring for months: the house

behind the dike, which was a far more vital clue to the mystery than the Abbey of Chalaroppe.

But whether the dead man had been a monk or a priest, or simply a lay brother, whether he had any connection at all with the church, whether the diocese wanted to recover his body in order to suppress a potential scandal in the religious community—all these were significant elements of the case. For if suicide in the eyes of the law is not a crime, in the eyes of divine law it does indeed constitute a sin of the gravest order, and doubly mortal since it involves the willful destruction of both body and soul. It is not by coincidence that, since the reign of Pope Alexander VIII, who also died in very peculiar circumstances, theologians have interpreted suicide as a flagrant offense, an act of defiance, against the Creator.

I didn't care to get into a theological dispute or take a position on the doctrines of Pietro Ottoboni; on that score, any churchman would know where he stood. But it troubled me to think that this stranger, whose bodily wreckage I had looked on, could have contemplated the destruction of his soul as well, a far worse sacrilege in his eyes. Nor had I ceased to speculate on the sinister power of the lady behind the dike who implanted in men's hearts such hopeless torment. What had she said, what had she done, or perhaps merely disclosed to the priest, that left him so despairing? And the dialogue I had imagined between her at her window and him in his tree, mute probably but no less pathetic, what could its tone have been? Did it concern God or Satan or Hell? How could we ever know? How could we hear it

above the angry hum of hornets?

“You’re right,” I told my reporter friend, “go back to the abbey. Try to find out who the man was, what he did, what he was after in this neck of the woods. But I’m afraid you won’t learn a thing.”

In fact he learned nothing. He came to see me again the following week, groaning with rage. Mustering all the tricks of his trade, he had managed to slip through the gates of Saint-Aubin and be received in the superior’s parlor; with a monk escort, he had toured the cloister, the garden, the graveyard. He had seen a newly dug, freshly raked grave surmounted by a white wooden cross, nameless. No one had spoken a word to him. He encountered, as he put it, “the silence of the confessional.” He was furious. “Take a prefect or a cabinet minister: if you pester them long enough, they cough up something in the end. But priests, never! A stone wall.”

Yes, the church’s strength is in its silence, and the paths of silence, like those of the Lord, are impenetrable. Behind the blue portals of the Abbey of Saint-Aubin, the secret would lie guarded—the dead man as well.

In town, however, a good deal of talk went on, and without telling my reporter friend, I pressed my private inquiry. People were talking, yes, but saying very little. Most of it was idle commentary on the event. “So now she’s got a yen for priests! Disgraceful!”

That seemed to be the average reaction. For in the

minds of the villagers, as in my own, there was a direct link between the hanging of the poor priest and this meddling lady behind the dike. Currently, the favored explanation was fornication. But fornication doesn't explain all. It is common knowledge that country priests enjoy as merry a sex life as any bachelor, yet they don't all end up swinging from oak trees.

Rendu agreed. But even Rendu's self-assurance seemed mildly shaken, as if he had missed something. Propped on his elbow as he drained the wineglasses at Monsieur Max's bar, he finally confessed to me one evening, scratching his neck in his own peculiar way, just behind the left ear, "I've got to admit it, I never expected it with that fellow. I'll be damned if he didn't get by me . . ."

He racked his brains, he blinked his little bulldog eyes, unable to comprehend how a priest, an outsider, had crept into the circle unannounced. For according to Rendu, as he informed me on a later evening, the next one was supposed to be Monsieur Viard. "You know Monsieur Viard, don't you, the druggist in Viezelles?"

For a moment I was stunned. Then I told myself, "How little we really know about anyone."

For some reason the villagers tend to patronize the Viezelles drugstore more than the one in Viormes. I'm not overly given to pill-swallowing, but when my son Fabien was living with me, and especially later with Marie-Claire, I needed an occasional drug and adopted the general prac-

tice of shopping in Viezelles rather than Viormes.

The druggist is a tall, spare, rather ungainly man, bald, with narrow glasses that perch on his nose. You always feel you're disturbing and annoying him. He's usually sitting at a small table in his shop, reading some fat, venerable, leather-bound volume on the order of: *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* by Alexander Radichtchev, printed in 1790, or perhaps de Tocqueville's *Penitentiary System in the United States*. He rises ruefully, grumbles as he waits on you, takes your money and returns to his book.

Only once, and under exceptional circumstances, did I have the nearest thing to a conversation with him. It was the Saturday afternoon of a very sultry August weekend, longer ago than I care to remember, and I consider him as the person who saved my life, ungracious as he was about it. I had spent the morning stretched out on a blanket in the grass, reading and talking to Jacqueline. I recall being vexed by the incessant clowning of her son Frédéric and ordering him sternly to go play on the swing at the far end of the meadow beyond the garage. After all too brief a respite, back trotted Frédéric on the verge of tears. "I can't go there! It's full of animals!" he wailed.

Clutching him firmly by the wrist, I marched him back to the swing. I was barefoot, barelegged, bare-chested, wearing nothing in fact but a pair of flowered bermudas. "Nonsense, Frédéric, there are no animals here. Only nice little ones maybe, bunnies and squirrels . . ."

Just at that moment—my God!—I stepped on a viper

that had curled up in the hot sand, on the apron of the meadow. It reared, struck me squarely above the ankle and fled into the underbrush.

A viper's bite is extremely painful—and frightening. The fangs leave plainly visible, scarlet marks, and in a few minutes the surrounding area swells and turns purple. Tears well up; muscles stiffen. I felt nauseous, shivering and sweating at the same time. I sat down against a tree at the meadow's edge, clamping both hands around my leg just below the knee.

"See, I told you so, there *are* animals!" Frédéric gloated.

"Go fetch Jacqueline. I've got to get to town right away. Hop to, little bunny!"

"I'm not a bunny," came the pouting retort.

Jacqueline rushed up and helped me into her car. She had had the presence of mind to bring the blanket, which I wrapped around me as I continued to bleed the wound with a penknife discovered in the catchall. I guided her street by street along the route to Viezelles.

"Are you sure it was a viper?" she asked.

"Am I sure! I know those beasties: not too big, triangular heads with a black V, stubby snout."

"Is it serious?"

"For Frédéric, it would have been. Especially in August, when snakes are deadliest. Do you realize what might have happened?"

With my leg extended, my bare foot rested on top of the glove compartment and was swelling hideously. It had turned completely blue. The numbness drifted upward to



the calf. Jacqueline's little feet, in lavender sandals, twitched restlessly on the pedals as we climbed a hill. She let the car creak along, drumming her fingers incessantly on the wheel and the shift. "Is your drugstore much farther?"

"Pretty far, yes."

"I'm almost out of gas . . ."

The engine began to splutter. A red indicator had lit up on the dashboard. "Typical Parisian female," I thought to myself, "insists on owning a car and then mistreats it. Never does the right thing, never what's needed." But who was I to complain, having done more than my share to foul up the day.

"There's a long downgrade after the first turn when you get to Viezelles. Go into neutral and switch off the motor."

Jacqueline did just that. With the engine silent, we slid merrily down the hill as if a hundred tons of ballast had just been jettisoned. The pain in my foot was growing unbearable, throbbing like a drumbeat all along the femoral artery as far up as my groin. Still, I couldn't help noticing the strange noises the car was making. I diagnosed brake linings worn down to the drums, front wheels in need of alignment; I heard the rear axle whining, the main cylinder hissing at each turn. "We'll never make Viezelles," I told myself.

I thought of the big white dog bitten in the neck by a viper which I watched dying quietly on the kitchen table, panting for breath, one summer in Névache when I was a child. My cousins the Rochas had broken off from the

harvest in Foncouverte to bring it in their arms down to my mother, who always kept a supply of serum in the house and who quickly slipped on her nurse's apron. But it was too late. The dog—I think his name was Billy—was already turning blue, glassy-eyed. He didn't even wince at the needle.

"Turn on the motor when the road levels out," I instructed Jacqueline. "Engage the clutch pedal all the way and go into third."

"Third?"

"Yes, third. Then disengage it slowly."

"Disengage? What does that mean?"

"It means releasing your left foot."

Frédéric, in the back seat, thought this was all a riot. We reached Monsieur Viard's shop without incident. The trip had taken nearly a quarter of an hour. "Let's hope the fool has some serum left," I thought.

He did. Tearing himself reluctantly from volume fourteen of the complete works of Baron d'Holbach—or something of the sort—he went to his refrigerator in the back room and brought out a can of Calmette serum. "That will be 365 francs," he announced in a flat voice filled with annoyance, drumming on the cash register with the receipt. "But let me warn you that the serum has to be injected within twenty minutes following the bite."

"Exactly, and there are three minutes to go," I replied. "I'm counting on you to do it right now."

By this time I had settled myself, with the injured leg

poised in mid-air, on the one small plastic red chair in the shop, alongside the scale. "Weigh yourself often," counseled the sign.

Immediately upon arrival, Frédéric had hopped up onto the platform and begun toying with the brass weights, to the druggist's visible distaste.

"It is out of the question, my dear sir," he informed me in an unwavering monotone, "I am not authorized. It is not my profession. You should have gone directly to the hospital in Viormes."

A tug of war began. Jacqueline was staring hard at Monsieur Viard out of big blue eyes, which indignation only made bigger. She was about to explode. I knew what was running through her mind: another time this man might let her son die rather than give him an injection; and now she would have to rush me to the hospital over impossible country roads—and without gas!

Silently, the druggist had proceeded to open the container, unseal the vial of serum and fill his hypodermic syringe. He came around the counter toward me. "First of all, it is not a vaccine. It is a serum. You who are a writer . . ."

He gave me three rapid, successive, and extremely painful shots in the vicinity of the bite, which I had done my best to bleed. Gripping the edge of the chair, I could barely keep from screaming. "How . . . do you know . . . I'm a writer?" I managed to stammer, wincing with pain.

"It's public knowledge," he replied in the same icy

key. "I watch television. I read the papers. I have read your books, which don't particularly appeal to me. I see no point in writing novels. And you are not a master of language. But my wife is crazy about them; she has decadent tastes. No, the best thing you've done probably is your edition of General Custine's travels . . ."

My God, what a thing to remind me of! In fact I had prepared, long before coming to Jouff and for strictly alimentary reasons, a hardbound, illustrated edition of *Voyage en Russie* for a now extinct Swiss book club. Armed with scissors and paste, I put in three days gutting an old edition; I rigged up a "critical apparatus" lifted from an encyclopedia and a scholarly preface entirely devoted to my own trip to Moscow and my nocturnal revels in that sober-minded city. Now, twenty years later, here was an elderly country pharmacist blithely denigrating my books as he sank a sterile syringe into my flesh, reducing my life and literary labors to that one miserable job. What a blow! And what a lesson!

The Calmette serum acts as dramatically as a viper's venom. Psychologically, at least, it had lightning effects. A few minutes later I felt restored, spared if you will. That same evening I left Jacqueline and her son at home while I went out prowling. To celebrate my "resurrection," I dropped in on a friend who expected me in her ivy-covered cottage overlooking the river, and proceeded to inject another type of poison—the kind generally associated with procreation. What a ball! What fun!

Monsieur Viard had ended the conversation and the

visit. "With the injection, 365 plus 115, that will be 480 francs," he announced, drumming on the cash register with a second ticket.

We had rushed out of the house in a panic without a penny, such offhandedness justified perhaps by the circumstances though scarcely commendable in Monsieur Viard's eyes. It produced another stinging comment about "people who think they can get away with anything because they write books," which I endured in silence, head drooping, half naked, wrapped in a blanket . . .

Oh well, it all goes to prove that my recollection of the Viezelles druggist was rather unpleasant and hasn't altered since, and that Rendu's startling disclosure took me completely aback.

"What are you trying to tell me? That Viard now sleeps with the lady? It's incredible."

"I didn't say that! You're putting words in my mouth. All I said is that the way I figured it, he should have been next."

You try to figure out what was going on in Rendu's agile mind! All I knew was that for the moment I wouldn't get another word out of him concerning the pharmacist. He was only interested in the man who hanged himself. In a way, he seemed vexed not to have anticipated the incident, annoyed at himself for selecting the wrong horse, like playing the pari-mutuel and missing the outsider. Where did that horse come from? That man? He pondered, he racked his brains and as usual, in the course of a few rounds

at Monsieur Max's bar, came up with an interesting tip. "If I were you, I'd have a word with the curé in Jouff, you know, old Father Escarpit. Those people don't keep secrets among themselves. If they don't know, they know *of*, each other . . . You see what I mean?"

I saw nothing at all. Rendu had a special talent for putting obscure thoughts into simple language. But his advice, I had learned, always contained a grain of truth, and I resolved to pursue it whatever the cost.

In the present instance, it cost me a lot. One of my abiding principles is never to open my mouth to a priest or an officer of the law. Rural gendarmes are something else. But if I'm out driving on a rainy November night, I'd sooner grope my way through the 20th arrondissement or the Paris suburbs than ask directions from a police officer. I never break the law, I know the driver's handbook by heart, I obey road signs to the letter no matter how idiotic they are and can spot one hidden off in a corner, or behind a thirty-ton truck, or anywhere at all on the sidewalk. If I've become a model driver—with the only unblemished record I know of: not a ticket or summons in twenty years on the road—it's not, alas, because I respect the law, not because I'm afraid of getting pinched, as they say, but because I dread the police. A dread so ingrained, so reasoned, so politic, that I avoid contact with the lowliest cop on the city force.

Similarly, but for different reasons, though I've taken pains over the years to develop neighborly, and occasionally

cordial, relations with the townspeople in Jouff, I've never exchanged a single word with the parish priest. At this stage I could hardly see myself ringing the presbytery bell to ask: "Say Father, who's the guy who hanged himself in the Viormes woods? I hear you knew him."

What should I do? Invent an excuse? Find an accomplice? I spent days devising ridiculous stratagems, all of which brought me to the conclusion that Rendu himself ought to visit the presbytery, that he was the ideal emissary to worm information out of the curé.

Once again, circumstances conspired to help me—and my car proved equally obliging, having returned unexpectedly from its Turkish travels, tired but content.

It is understandable that my passion for automobiles has led over the years to a very special relationship with one of the district's garage owners, one Nathanaël Kovachs. What appealed to me instantly about this man, soon after I moved to Jouff and had been turned away by a number of "exclusive dealers" and white-coated "shop foremen" in various Viormes repair stations, was that he knew nothing at all—or practically nothing—about mechanics, electricity, body work, or painting. And made no pretense of it.

His real love was the violin and goulash. Also pine trees. As he can't live without pines, he plants them all around his garage. He even managed to grow a double-headed variety, which he accidently decapitated one day with his lawn mower.

The only reason this great strapping Hungarian hap-

pens to own a garage in France is because, having fled the pre-war fascist regency of Horthy, he seduced and married the daughter of an auto repair shop owner in Pleutre. If he had climbed aboard a shoemaker's daughter in the Vaucluse, he'd have a shoe shop today in Carpentras! This fascinating, garrulous fellow pours out an incredible stream of untranslatable French—what you might call a recent language import from the Carpathians.

The first time I stopped at his place, it was once when I was just out for a spin and noticed a delapidated shed cluttered with cartons and drums and oil cans vaguely suggestive of a repair shop, he informed me indignantly, "No sir, I do *not* carry gas. Gas I will never carry. It's rotten, poisonous stuff, this French gas!"

All I needed in fact, and had needed for some time, was to tighten a bolt awkwardly wedged below the shaft of the water pump, which had developed an annoying rattle. I had given up on it for lack of the proper tool. I was sure a size 14 wrench would do the trick: long and thin with a U-crook base and swivel retractor head, required because the double exhaust manifold impeded any left-to-right motion.

Instead of sending me back to my books with a sneer, Kovachs grasped the problem at once—not only grasped it but espoused it for his own. And what I admired most about the man that day was his unwillingness to waste time searching for the right tool, which he probably couldn't have found anyway under all the mess in his shop. "Whatever tool we don't have we simply make," he declared confidently.



Having read Durkheim, I knew for certain that a man who fashions his own tools is *ipso facto* intelligent.

The operation lasted four hours. It might have been infinitely longer if, at dusk, when Kovachs had already lit and distributed electric lanterns about the shop, his missus, née Germaine Fontaine, hadn't stuck her nose through the window to announce periodically that the soup was ready, the cheese casserole scorched, the meat drying out, that she'd already eaten her way up to the cheese course . . .

"That woman stuffs me, sir," Kovachs confided in a stage whisper. "For forty years she's been stuffing me and look how thin I am. Because she pumps me dry!"

In the course of that long afternoon we had begun to exchange confidences. To repair the bad impression his wife was sure to make, Kovachs felt compelled to recount some of his "lucky breaks," a theme with endless variations:

"I see a customer pulling up—a sport car something like yours, only there's this gorgeous dame in it . . . Must have been a model, classy goods, you know. Manufacturer's guarantee! Nothing wrong with her car just between you and me . . . it worked fine . . . Then she starts buzzing around the shop. Oo la la! Rubbing herself. And what a pair of bubs! Listen, I walk out to the back room for a tool. She follows me, out to the back room, that's right. Off comes her dress, zip! right over her head. Not a stitch underneath. I was kind of embarrassed you know; put yourself in my place, an old fellow like me. And Germaine right next door in the kitchen. What a woman . . . a real pip, I'm telling you. She had the urge, that's all. Never

saw her again. Then there was the time when up drives . . .”

As the tool was almost ready we agreed that I'd come back the next day and we'd try to tighten the bolt. From week to week the conversation went on that way.

Near Pleutre there is an inn catering to weekend guests from Paris. Room: 110 francs; dinner: 85. Specialty of the house: adulterous couples—government officials off the leash. Privacy assured.

Owing to his trade as well as to his geographical location, Nathanaël Kovachs has become the arbiter and confidant in all these delicate affairs. He consoles baffled wives who are pursuing, with children in the back seat, the trace of their errant mates. He lectures two-timed husbands who threaten mayhem. Once he even hid in his back-room closet a luscious little secretary who had packed off for the weekend with her editor (I think I know which paper), and just as she was about to pop into bed with the gentleman, who was providing the room and meals, suddenly changed her mind and dashed out of the inn shouting, “You're really too big an ass, you really are! So long!”

Week after week, month after month, dressed in overalls on a stool in front of my car's open hood, Kovachs narrated his life. He described his childhood in Hungary, the drowning of his sister in the Danube, the regent Horthy and fascism's rise, his uncle's arrest, the exodus of “democrats” to France and England, the war, the resistance, his marriage to Germaine, his repair shop, his lucky breaks and, of course, what happened to Budapest.

Kovachs had a perfectly clear grasp of the Hungarian

situation; not for an instant had it fooled him. "Don't you ever have the urge to go back?" I asked him occasionally.

"But there's Germaine, sir, what would she do in a Communist country?"

Soon I was being treated to lantern-lit violin recitals in the shop. Later to Sunday goulash in the kitchen with Germaine. In the span of many cars we've become fast friends.

Owing to my preoccupation—verging at times on obsession—with Mademoiselle B. and the series of disturbing incidents that were clouding my existence, I had neglected this friendship for the past several months. Not once during the entire summer had I been to Pleutre. Kovachs must have thought me dead and buried. One evening, as I was trying to figure out how to approach Father Escarpit, Kovachs telephoned. "Hurry, Monsieur Ponz," he said, as if we had just seen each other the day before, and pronouncing my name with his customary enthusiasm for n's and z's, "Hurry! You should see this slaughter. In the intersection, just as you get to Pleutre."

Friends of mine are familiar with my passionate interest (some would call it morbid; I call it mystical) in motor accidents. They provide a fund of fascinating images, a source of serious meditation. They symbolize Dame Distress erupting savagely into the heart of fragile dreams, of defenseless existences. In short, at Kovachs' call I grabbed jacket and cap and dashed for the car.

What a sight! The two cars seemed to have devoured

each other. They had merged into a single compact mass of steel. Glass splinters littered the roadway, strips of metal, headlights, torn-off wheels. Clothing, books, papers, shoes, dolls, a bunch of flowers bathing in a mixture of oil and blood. A basket of apples overturned in the street.

Climbing the hill to the village, I had passed the ambulance rushing back to Viormes with the victims—a young mother and her two children, I learned later, one of whom, the little girl, was horribly mutilated and dying. But the gendarmes were still there taking measurements, tracing brake marks, gathering up scattered objects.

Kovachs, who had come in overalls with his tow truck, was poking through the wreckage. And whom should I see standing alone in the intersection, stiff as a ramrod, face drawn and haggard, but Jouff's old curé in his filthy cassock, his head cradled in two bloodstained hands! It was the un hoped for.

“. . . and here am I safe and sound,” he moaned as I came up to him, “unharm ed. My God, how is it possible? I have caused a death. The child will surely die; I gave her extreme unction. Yet I'm unharm ed. My God! My God!”

I stared at him, bewildered. The cuts scoring his temples and hands seemed to be superficial. On his head, however, above the hairline, a colossal lump was ballooning, the size of a cider apple, distended, extravasating blood like a pulsating heart about to burst. “If he sees it or touches it,” I thought, “he'll simply faint.” But he didn't touch it and had no way of seeing it.

I always keep a first-aid kit in the car and a flask of

brandy. Taking the old curé aside, I dabbed his face clean with some alcohol, avoiding the lump, then poured him a dash of brandy.

“And me without a permit,” he moaned. “No insurance. What will happen to me?”

“Idiot! Menace!” I thought, but said nothing. He had just killed a little girl, and gravely injured her brother and mother. Without a license, without insurance. Now he was worried about his own neck. It made me feel like squashing the lump on his head. But I did nothing of the sort. I merely advised him to go home and compose himself.

“How do you expect me to get home?” he stammered. “Look at my car. What about the police? Won’t they detain me? Listen, do you think they’ll hold me?”

I glanced scornfully at the battered old Panhard imbedded into the front seats of the little Citroen “2 CV.” The Panhard I’ve always considered utterly ridiculous and pretentious, with its two-stroke motor, its drooping rear and front, the way it rumbles along crackling like a motor scooter. That day I considered it criminal. As for “2 CV’s,” in my opinion they’re funeral urns designed specially for murderers and suicides. I went over to the gendarmes and told them, “I’m driving the curé home. He’s completely done in. You can come for his deposition later.”

They made no objection. I waved to Kovachs who had slipped a chain under the Panhard’s rear axle and was tugging at it savagely with his towing gear. “See you soon. And thanks for letting me know,” I called to him.

Now that I had my priest, I wasn't about to let him go.

As I slid in next to him in the front seat, I took care to flip aside the rear-view mirror. It wouldn't do for him to discover the bulge on his head. I offered him a cigarette to keep his hands occupied. Instead, he drew a pipe, a tobacco pouch and a box of matches out of the pocket of his cassock. Fine! Less chance of him accidentally brushing his hand over his forehead.

I was already in fourth and storming downhill. The motor roared, the speedometer neared the red zone. I was rounding the curves on two wheels. Wind whistled through chinks in the canvas roof; the radio antenna flapped like a storm-battered mizzen mast. My passenger in black was white as a sheet. I had decided not to pamper him but to take him in hand.

"You're driving very fast," was his only comment after I shifted abruptly from high to second on reaching the center of Jouff.

"True, but I don't have accidents and my record is clean."

He seemed exhausted, too tired even to smoke his pipe; he kept squeezing the tobacco pouch in his lap.

When we reached the presbytery, I parked the car alongside the low stone wall. I reached past him to open his door. As he wriggled out of the seat, his pipe and matches tumbled into the grass. I went round to pick them up, partly to emphasize his clumsiness, partly for fear he might bang his head against the door frame. He mumbled

an apology. It was as if I were delivering a limp rag to the doorstep.

I followed him inside. The doors were unlocked. He collapsed at once into a low velvet armchair, worn to the seams, with a sickeningly soiled lace doily for a headrest.

Cluttered with tasteless furnishings and hideous knick-knacks, the room seemed imprisoned in its own ugliness and dirt. Bunches of blessed boxwood, stuck onto the crucifixes between the feet of the crucified, had been drying and gathering dust since Palm Sunday. Over everything hung a rank odor, a mixture of mildewed cheese, soiled linen, and incense, absolutely suffocating. Ecclesiastical filth.

Undaunted, I took off my jacket and cap and attempted to stir up a fire in the grate, heaping kindling and several logs over some live coals. And having noticed on the sideboard a tall, slender bottle of pear wine next to a tray of glasses, I took it upon myself to pour us each a generous serving. Then I sat down facing him in front of the fireplace, on a kind of prayer bench.

"It's very charitable of you to look after me this way, my son, after what I've been through . . ."

"Poor fool," I thought, "if the police ever do a blood test on you . . ." Afraid that he was about to explain how the accident had occurred, to overwhelm me with his remorse, his doubts, his anxieties, I launched my own attack. "Listen, I wanted to ask you something, about the man they found hanging in the woods: is it true that he was a priest?"

The old man began to whimper. "Ah, my son, that's another story. But I had nothing to do with it. I was only doing my duty, my duty as a priest . . ."

Something clicked inside my head. Thanks, Rendu. Thanks, Kovachs. So Jouff's old curé had no part in the suicide but was involved somehow in the affair. He knew something—and by God, I would know it too! The pear wine was tasty enough; I took a hefty gulp, and replenished the old man's glass. Simmering with impatience and curiosity, I felt a bit like Sherlock Holmes. "Your duty? How so?"

Whining, waiting to be prodded at every pause, appealing to my discretion, my "charity," the Abbé Escarpit began to supply details. Eye-opening details, tossed out at random, the chronology of which took me several days to reconstruct, patiently and methodically, in my head.

The old priest had been living in Jouff for nearly thirty years and was well aware of Mademoiselle B.'s existence, though he knew her no better than most villagers. She was not one to attend catechism or mass. He had made it a policy to regard her as neither prostitute nor witch, but merely as a "wayward woman." A fairly simple view, though in the last few months his feelings had changed somewhat.

For him as for me the process had started with the suicide of Maugendre, the insurance agent found floating in the river. Even earlier, for in the weeks preceding the drowning Maugendre had made several attempts to contact



him. The man whom my young friends at the Viormes switchboard liked to call "Condom Face" was a practicing Catholic, and, according to Father Escarpit's tale, was so tormented at the time, so conscience-stricken, that he asked to make confession, but only to an unknown priest from outside the diocese. He hit upon the curé of Jouff. (Perhaps he thought that Father Escarpit was the lady's confessor?) In any event, he communicated his wishes in such a confused manner and behaved so oddly that the old priest instinctively backed off, referring the matter to his superiors. "Believe me," he whined, "I didn't refuse to hear his confession. But I'm just a poor parish priest. I can absolve ordinary sins, but not that! My bishop decided that this particular case called for more expert spiritual guidance."

The Abbé Escarpit thus became something of an intermediary between Maugendre and Father Matthieu from the Abbey of Saint-Aubin. The meeting and confession had taken place one April afternoon in the church sacristy in Jouff. The conversation had lasted over seven hours. That same evening, at dusk, Maugendre drowned himself. Six months later, Father Matthieu was found hanging in the Viormes woods. "You know, it could have been I," the old man observed as I poured him another glass of pear wine, "if I'd heard his confession. The Lord has spared me that ordeal."

What the two men had said—more to the point, what Maugendre had confessed—no one will ever know. But when pressed hard and pinned down, Father Escarpit

finally admitted the very thing I had expected to hear: that grief and despair had entered Maugendre's "soul" the day he began to "frequent" the lady behind the dike. What category of "sin" was committed under that secluded roof far from prying eyes? The old curé hadn't the faintest notion, nor was he eager to repair his ignorance.

"It must be something abominable, sir."

"Maugendre told you nothing? Nothing at all?"

"Not a word, sir. He wished to speak only to God, through a priest."

Yet the curé also knew that shortly after Maugendre's tragic end, shortly after they dragged his body from the river and buried it, Father Matthieu began reappearing in the neighborhood. The first time Father Escarpit, while driving toward Vaudeville, had passed him on the narrow, scenic road to Jouff, on foot and alone, wearing ordinary clothes. A second time, at dusk, he had spotted him running for the woods in Viormes, plunging through thickets as if pursued by demons. The last time, at dawn, he had seen Matthieu dash off along the dike road at his approach, and had had the distinct impression—but no proof—that Dom Matthieu was just leaving the lady's bolted and shuttered house. "I'm sure he tried to see her. He was an apostle. He would have wanted to save her soul even if it meant damning his own."

At that moment, having talked and drunk a good deal, the Abbé Escarpit emptied his glass once more and rose from his seat to set it on the mantelpiece. It may have been

his way of informing me that he had drunk and talked enough.

Turning, as he shuffled over to the fireplace, he made the careless gesture I dreaded: running his hand across his forehead, his fingers touched the soft, voluminous protuberance. He paled, trembling like a leaf, as if he had just brushed against the devil's codpiece. "Good God!" he cried, staggering backward into his armchair—and this time it was no saintly invocation but pure profanity—"Oh God, what have I got? What's happened to me?" Stammering and stuttering, he fingered the lump in horror. Ashen, with knees quaking, he was on the verge of collapse.

Here was my chance to escape. "It's nothing; it will pass," I assured him, grabbing my jacket and cap.

In the doorway, prompted by a rush of pity, I urged him, "Don't look at it, whatever you do, or you'll pass out."

"You're leaving me! Just like that!"

I climbed into the car and turned out onto the roadway. The police arrived just as I was driving off; I beeped the horn in greeting.

Booted, gauntleted, helmeted, zipped into his black leather jacket, my son Fabien arrived suddenly one day on his motorcycle. It was a superb machine made in Japan, a giant chrome bug he had managed to pry out of me in a poker game earlier that summer, on board which he'd been roaming the roads of Norway as far north as Lapland. To make up for flunking his baccalaureate, he said. He didn't really give a damn whether or not he got the certificate. He looked splendid and exultant. I was elated to see him. "So, how's Norway?"

"Oh, you know . . . See what I brought back?"

Hugging him from behind—helmeted, gauntleted, booted, and zipped into a black leather jacket—was a blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked young thing glowing with health and beauty. As she swung out of the rear saddle with equestrian flair, I watched the muscles of her thighs and buttocks flex under her denim pants. She took off her helmet, loosing a cascade of yellow hair. Smiling and pumping my hand, she pronounced a series of strange words evidently meant to greet me. God, how beautiful they both were. A magazine romance in color, a living ad for that underrated and much disparaged product: Life.

"Her name is Inge," Fabien informed me proudly. "Say

whatever you want, since she doesn't know a word of French."

"That must make it hard for the two of you to talk . . ."

"Oh, who wants to talk . . ."

Touché. The pair unstrapped a bulging duffel bag from the luggage rack and dragged it into the kitchen. Fabien put his machine in the garage, then I showed them up to their room.

Soon, as I set about indulgently to prepare a potato casserole, the splashing of the shower floated down from the bathroom, amid ripples of Norwegian laughter. Dinner was acrobatic but merry enough.

"My father—writer," Fabien explained patiently. "Writes books. Schreibt Bücher."

"Ah! Sehr gut!" Inge beamed, stuffing her face with yogurt.

Young people amaze me. When I think of myself at their age—submissive, withdrawn, timid, conformist—I envy and intensely admire today's youth for their self-assurance and composure; for their utter indifference and wild expectations; for their unsuppressible nonchalance and their ravenous appetites.

As far as Fabien and Inge were concerned, I realized at once that neither of them had money or plans or wanted them. So be it. Perhaps their company would make my winter less lonely.

"How's Michèle? Do you still see her?" Fabien suddenly inquired.

“Michèle’s in America,” I told him.

It wasn’t true. On her return from the United States we had quarreled violently, not over the metaphysical issues I had anticipated but over politics. She had reacted personally to an impersonal observation I blurted out rather thoughtlessly on the phone about French tourists who trot off to America while Americans are bombing and killing in Vietnam.

The remark was all the more ill-advised since Michèle shared my own hatred for Nixon and the evil forces that brought him to power and were keeping him there. Her trip did not involve any compromise. But in a fit of anger, she pounced on the chance (which she may have been waiting for) to claw me to shreds. She ended up announcing that she was through dragging around a decrepit writer who wasn’t even writing any more, a sham, egotistic hermit retired to the wilderness, cut off from reality, and that she felt relieved, yes RELIEVED, to abandon me to my neurotic fantasies!

Instead of replying or defending myself as she rambled on and on, instead of chuckling at her tirade, shifting onto more promising ground, or inviting her to dinner at the little Chinese place on Rue Mouffetard, I just listened in silence, head drooping, my left thumb and index finger pressing against my eyes, a habit I revert to whenever I’m sad and in a fog. I listened silently, repeating over and over to myself, “How right she is! How plainly she sees it all! How ruthless she is!”

“That’ll be four message units,” Brigitte announced at the close of the conversation, snickering into the phone. “You got off cheap. When I broke up with Marcel it cost him eleven units: thirty-three francs and thirty centimes . . .”

It was all very distressing, but that’s the way it happened. I knew I wouldn’t see Michèle for a long time. Perhaps never. Certainly not that winter.

I also sensed that we were due for a nasty bout of winter that year.

At the end of October generally, flocks of seagulls from the ocean shores begin winging inland along streams and rivers, passing over our region on their way to the interior. It’s a clear sign. I remember their shrill cries, the flurry of snowy plumage high among bare branches on the eve of that famous winter of 1966.

That was the year we were snowbound for over three weeks. The Flanne froze solid down to the canal locks. The butcher, the baker, the postwoman stopped delivering. The woodpile dwindled. It took nothing short of an alpine expedition to fetch newspapers and cigarettes from town. It was marvelous!

I was hoping against hope for another such winter. Snow and ice were absolutely crucial to a film I had written set in frostbound Czarist Russia, which my friend Nat planned to start shooting after the first snowfall. Our Lebanese producer had laid down the law: “There will be no film in the absence of snow.”

How he arrived at that faintly sorcerous injunction I don't know, but he repeated it several times and inserted it in our contracts out of meteorologic superstition.

The seagulls didn't appear. Nor did the snow. I decided to wait however long it took, in utter idleness and isolation, nearly beggared save for the meager allowance advanced periodically by my publisher against a book I shall never write.

Each morning, glued to the windowpane like a miracle-seeker, I recited over and over these lines by Apollinaire, so charged with fervent hope:

Then fall snow!

Fall, and fall

Beloved into my arms . . .

I began the winter as one takes up religion.

Madame Fijutte, my housekeeper, was getting on now and apt to be sick. At times she didn't come to work for weeks on end, and the house sank into neglect. I didn't mind. Dishes piled up in the stone sink and I piled up logs under the shed.

Brigitte and Stéphanie had been transferred outside the district by the phone company. There were complaints, it seems, about their "insolence" to customers.

The parish priest had gone off for a bit of "relaxation" to a church retreat approved by the social security board. Didn't get off so bad, the old bugger!

People in town talked about the death of Monsieur Viard, the druggist in Viezelles. He had died in his own



bed, looked after by his wife, surrounded by his books and medicine droppers. A prosaic end. An ordinary funeral where nothing extraordinary occurred. Only Rendu, the home brewer, voiced his doubts.

"You better find out what he died of," he advised me during one of our barroom conversations. "A druggist is like a hedgehog. Sad animal. Dies when it chooses."

I had asked him, as I do each year, to save me one day at the end of autumn for cutting up my logs with his power saw. For the first time, he volunteered to drop over whenever I wished and "fix my apples." If I collected them in a tub, he'd do the rest. This would be a distinct favor, for Rendu's services were much in demand at applejack time. It was also a social promotion, proof that I had ceased to be an outsider in the district. Now I could run for local office!

He kept his word. On the chosen day—Fabien and Inge had settled in some time before—I watched him roll up in front of the shed, perched like Ben Hur aboard his curious, three-wheeled traveling still. We had a merry day.

Rendu had warned me that the best brandy comes from year-old fruit pressings. But just for the fun of it we loaded the cauldron with apples and set it to boil. By nightfall, a strange liquid was trickling out of the coil into a slender-necked clay jar I had unearthed in the attic. In a few hours Rendu's still had come up with nearly three quarts of pure brandy.

"You deserve it, you deserve it!" he chuckled, rubbing his hands, amused at our excitement.

After corking and sealing the jar himself, he warned us not to touch it until the following summer. "Look out! It's poison right now. Pure poison."

That day Rendu stayed to dinner for the first time. There was leftover rabbit and the potato casserole. Inge made a Norwegian crêpe flambée topped with whipped cream.

The knacker was in great form. He regaled us with stories of his father, a horse dealer in Jouff and the town's last smithy. "He painted too. Horses. If he liked a horse, he'd paint its portrait before selling it. In oil, now, Monsieur Pons. You come to my house some day. A horse museum, like Versailles is for kings. With names and dates: Fifi, 1902—Blanchette, 1905 . . ."

Naturally enough I turned the conversation to local gossip, and to events not so natural, the series of suspicious deaths during the past year: the drowning victim in the Flanne, the hanged man in the Viormes woods, to which Rendu insisted on adding Viard the druggist. "Look, I never said he was visiting the lady," he reminded me, eyes narrowing, finger wagging, like a schoolmaster. "All I can say is she was seeing him at the drugstore. More than once. On foot. And it's some hike from the dike to Viezelles."

As usual Rendu said too much and too little. But this time I was careful not to antagonize him by raising elementary objections, such as the fact that everyone in town shopped at the Viezelles drugstore; that I myself went there from time to time; that it meant nothing and proved noth-

ing. It seemed to me, after our fraternal distilling ritual, that the cozy, leisurely atmosphere of dinner in the kitchen, followed by cigarettes, coffee and rum, made an ideal setting for disclosures and secret confessions. I agreed with him. "You're right, it's a long way. Does she go through the woods?"

"Through the woods or over the moor. She doesn't like to be seen. She goes at night. And you, would *you* go ring the druggist's bell at night, for a couple of aspirin?"

Night . . . Just then I thought of the summer night when Mademoiselle B. had appeared in my bedroom, sitting on the bench, holding her needlework. The image of the white lady came back to me, her wide, staring eyes, the finger on her lips urging silence, secrecy . . . I described the scene for Rendu, stressing the propitious factors: the deserted grounds, my bedroom door that was never locked and had direct access to the meadow. I told him of Michèle's reaction and my own doubts. Had I dreamed it? Did she really come?

"It's not impossible," the street cleaner repeated twice, nodding his head. "I know she hangs out on your property, but usually up where the chateau used to be . . . You remember what day it was?"

Good heavens, how would I know that? Unlike Victor Hugo, I don't keep a diary. I've never possessed an appointment book or a calendar . . . I'm not a dentist! "See how short my days are," my editor once confessed, pointing to an engagement book filled with red and blue scribbles out to the margins. My own days are very long, completely

empty; days and nights slip by leaving no trace. Michèle would remember; Michèle has a fantastic memory, especially for dates and figures.

“What day was it? Why do you ask? Is it important?”

“It might be important. There are some days, nights more likely, when the lady’s at her oddest. Something to do with the moon . . .”

Michèle ought to know. But Michèle, alas . . . I couldn’t imagine myself telephoning to ask her the date of my own dreams, or question her about the new moons last summer . . . I’d expose myself to a tongue lashing worse than the last one.

“Gotta crank my motor,” Rendu announced, preparing suddenly to leave.

Out of the question. I wasn’t going to let him rush off before telling me everything. Citing the late hour and the rutted roads as an excuse, I offered to drive him home and come back for him the next morning. Anything! He accepted, rather gratefully I thought, just as he accepted my harping on the subject I had broached.

Intrigued as I was by his remarks and the incidental facts they brought to light, I must admit in retrospect, that I harbored a tinge of skepticism, not so much as to Rendu’s explanations, as to his rather ghostly inferences. Was it because I had thought of Michèle and her rigorous, logical mind? With his moonlit scenarios and vanished chateaux, Rendu seemed to be carrying things too far, and probably in the wrong direction.

Yet I kept trying to make him talk, stretching out the

trip to Jouff that night in order to prolong the conversation. I was driving a little bit like André Schwartz-Bart likes to. We had gone out cruising with him one day along the narrow, steeply winding slopes of Martinique while he told us about the book he was writing. André became so engrossed in his tale that he forgot to change gears. The car stalled on every hill. He'd set the hand brake, turn off the ignition and pull out the starter. Shifting into first, he'd forget to release the brake. A Carribean epic! I couldn't bear to interrupt him with something so prosaic as "Listen, you forgot to turn on the motor . . . Release your brake . . ." Christiane finally got out and took the wheel. He didn't even notice . . . If it weren't for her we'd still be talking today, somewhere along the road between Le Carbet and Basse-Pointe.

"If you ever want to meet the lady," the street sweeper went on, "million to one, now, you'll never guess. Just try dropping over that way, over there by the dump."

"The public dump? Over on the moor? Where you take the garbage?"

"That's it. That's her favorite spot. And what does she do there? You've heard about those little fires always starting at the dump. People say it happens prettyeasy to garbage, with all the live ashes around and the live 'matter.' Well it's not true. Now I ask you Monsieur Pons, why does the lady go there after dark? And light little candles, you know, like birthday candles on a cake. I know the dump inside out; it's my business. How come when I poke around a bit I find little items that didn't get there all by them-

selves? And I didn't bring them either, I can promise you that."

"You're on the wrong track," I murmured to myself angrily. I wasn't going to be hoodwinked by Rendu, with his tales of black magic and witches in the moonlight. No, this was Jouff on the banks of the Flanne, not the shanty towns of Brazil. Macumba is still unknown in this part of the country.

"What little items? For instance?" I demanded, shifting into low after a long pause at the intersection.

"That's something I can't tell you. No, that I can *not* tell you."

We finally came to the knacker's house. My headlights flooded the double entranceway. Painted in white on a flaking crimson signboard was a horse's head with flaring nostrils and tossing mane. Also visible, though some of the letters needed repair, was the circular inscription running round its perimeter: "Antonin Rendu—Horse Dealer." The diagonal stroke of the "R" in Rendu had worn off completely; in fact it said "Pendü"—hanged man.

I deny being superstitious, but under the circumstances that oddity alarmed me, and I know why: seared in my memory were brutal images of Father Matthieu dangling from his oak, with the hornets plundering his lolling tongue. Nor could I forget that Rendu had played Nicodemus in that tragic deposition scene.

“Do I get a look at your father’s paintings?” I ventured boldly.

“It’s kind of late for me,” he replied. “Anyway, at this time of night you couldn’t see a thing inside.”

He was getting away from me before I’d had a chance to get back to the hanging, to my talk with the old curé and his amazing tale about Dom Matthieu. In a desperate effort to shift our conversation from the horse dealer to that other Antonin whose manly prowess was something of a legend, I asked him, “Didn’t your father know old Antonin, the father of Mademoiselle B.?”

The street sweeper burst out laughing. With his raw, stubby hands that tapered into jagged nails scored with nicks and scratches, he slapped through his corduroy pants against his lean thighs. “Ha! That’s a good one!” he jeered. “Oh, Monsieur Pons, but you’re a real sucker! No offense Monsieur Pons, but if you think that Antonin . . . Oh, no! If you think the lady . . . But everyone’s told you a hundred times . . .” He paused, groping for words, and finished his sentence like this: “Everyone’s told you that those things don’t have descendants.”

Did he mean to say “*ascendants*”? Did he really believe rumors that the lady behind the dike had “neither father nor mother”? That she was found hibernating timelessly like a bat between two stones in an old wall?

I remembered Madame Fijutte using the word “creature,” and now he had spoken of a “thing.” What did it mean? What was in his mind? A ghost? A specter? A

ghoul? Whatever, nothing could shake my conviction that to Maugendre, to Aurélien, and to Dr. Bluche, Mademoiselle B. was first and foremost a woman. "A whore!" the farmer's wife had shouted.

Would Father Matthieu have hanged himself for a whore? Right in front of her window? In an act that might be called criminal, though to me it suggested a protest, a rush of despairing passion, on the heels of what astounding revelation?

The pesky fellow had already pried himself out of his seat and was opening a low wooden door carved into the entranceway. I got out in turn and walked around the car. But I knew I was not going to enter.

"See you tomorrow," he said, shaking my hand hurriedly, and he disappeared down some kind of dark inner alley behind the sign of the white horse.

I turned into the darkness and retraced my route. I felt agitated, vexed, uncertain. I wasn't sleepy and didn't feel like going home. I cruised around the slumbering town, racing the engine. Not a single light. Even Monsieur Max's tavern was barricaded behind a solid wall of wooden shutters. I passed the church and the shuttered presbytery. At the intersection, I turned left and headed for the moor. A splendid night. Inky sky, moonless yet crystal clear. Swarms of stars. Bare birches, clusters of broom shivering in the chill wind.

I drove into the valley at a fast clip. The road was deserted. As I raced along, the radio antenna trembled vio-



lently. I arrived in Vaudeville, turned in the square and retraced my path.

On the way back I took a side road that leads to the moor and the public dump. A cul-de-sac among ancient sand pits. A lunar landscape, desolate but arresting, where gravel and sand had been extracted over the years, leaving steep watery pits, pointed mounds of pebbly earth lined up for inspection like volcano cones.

Straight in front of me, in the headlights' glare, rose a mountain of garbage and assorted rubbish which barred my path. It's appalling to consider what we throw out in the country in the way of cans, boxes, bedsprings, stoves, hats, casks, bicycles, all covered with, steeping in, masses of organic and vegetable waste. I've always been fond of this secluded, rather morbid spot, the public dump, which lends itself to extravagant meditations: cemetery of consumption, where the wreckage of family life sinks to rest and rot. On many a soft summer night I've driven here, over the moor, with girl friends from Iran or Yugoslavia who yearn to know the romance of the French countryside . . . It works every time. Better than any Gothic abbey or medieval castle!

That night I wasn't feeling exactly giddy. Still brooding, I pondered Rendu's tantalizing remarks: "Birthday candles . . . little items . . ." What little items? Mandrake root, for instance? No, really, Rendu must be imagining things, he's a bit balmy. I'm not about to fall into step behind him and start poking through the cinders.

After pausing to contemplate the majestic monument

of municipal waste, I shifted into reverse and backed down the incline onto level ground. The headlights, like a ship's beacon, swept the darkness far out along the moor. The desolate black waters were spiked with broom and dead trees over which the mist had lowered, almost to the ground, a glistening shroud. The wind still gusted, though rather high up, propelling long fluffy strands across the starry sky. What a night! What a setting for a witch's ride!

Rendu's fantasies kept trotting through my head. My mind lay exposed to every fear and speculation. If suddenly I'd seen the white lady come riding over the moor astride a broomstick; or crossed paths with the devil himself, stark naked and glowing red, dragging her by the hair into a circle of fire, I wouldn't have batted an eyelash.

I ought to have turned back to the main road and gone straight home. Instead, with senseless obstinacy, I plunged on over narrowing dirt lanes into the heart of the moor. The ruts grew deeper and muddier. Wild grasses raked the sides of the car, and I had barely six inches of ground clearance. Any minute I might end up like a fool, with crankcase stuck in the mud, unable to budge. The electric clock on the dashboard said midnight. I'd look like an idiot walking all the way back to Pleutre on these deserted roads to wake Kovachs in the middle of the night and get him to tow me out of here. I could already hear him saying, "I can't figure out what you're up to round here in the middle of the night, Monsieur Ponz." Not that I could figure it out either.

Happily, luck was with me. I came to a flat, dry path

barely wide enough to let me pass, which joined up with the dike road at the edge of the woods. I was able to shift into second and, with considerable relief, stepped on the gas.

In no time, Mademoiselle B.'s house loomed before me, all black against the black sky. Impressive. I'd never approached it from behind. I noticed for the first time, on the blind side, under the ridge of the roof, an oxeye window looking out on the moor. Nor had I ever approached it so late at night: just as I intersected the dike road, in front of the house, the red hands on my luminous clock converged on the number 12. Midnight!

"Uh, oh!" I thought, both to scare and to reassure myself, for in fact my heart was in my boots. "Witches' sabbath, devil's revels!" Did I expect a ball of fire to hurtle down the chimney, or sinister shrieks to fill the air? Nothing happened. The house remained dark and silent. I drove around it slowly, almost at a crawl. Should I stop and knock on the iron shutter? No. I drove off slowly toward Jouff. I passed through the slumbering town and this time went directly home.

My son had left his motorcycle, propped against its stand, right in the middle of the garage. I had to get out of the car and move it, which is no picnic with a machine of that size. I was fuming. The lights were still on in the kitchen but the house was still. Fabien and Inge must have gone up to bed after we left without bothering to clear the table, to cork up bottles or empty ashtrays. By now I was seething. If by some miracle Madame Fijutte should appear

tomorrow, she'd blame me for the mess.

To calm myself, I started a rapid clean-up that rapidly developed into frenzied dishwashing, taking care to smother any noise that might disturb the youngsters' blissful repose. I scoured everything in sight, from the stew pan and a pile of pot covers accumulated in the sink down to the last straggling utensil. At two in the morning, exhausted but composed, I was still camped on the kitchen stool unplugging holes in the garlic press with a matchstick.

Just like me, I thought mournfully. People in Paris think I live a princely existence in some sort of Renaissance palace. Fabien assumes I spend my nights boozing it up with the town soaks or gadding about the countryside chasing women. And here I am! What an evening! All for whom, for what? For love of nothing, really, for the seed of hope I still carry about, like a splinter, lodged in my heart . . . I shall depart . . . One day, along some icy roadside, I'll set down my sack of flesh, my ragged earthly baggage. I'll go far, far away . . . drifting in the wind with the star dust . . . I'll meet that little sister I never had named Blanche or Blandine. Or perhaps Enina? Who haunts my nights.

I who never dream ("That's what *you* think!" Michèle would say) had a strange dream last night: the lady behind the dike came into my room again and sat on my bench. She wore old-fashioned clothes, a long lavender dress under a sweeping violet cloak. Coiled about her waist, like a belt, was a live viper, black-headed with a long gold body.

This time, however, I was indeed dreaming, for Ma-

demoiselle B. was my mother. My mother as a young girl or a young bride, the way she appeared in old sepia-tinted family photographs. As for me, a little boy in an unfamiliar black velvet suit with knee pants, frightened by the snake's black head, I was rummaging frantically through my pencil drawer for a weapon, and found only a baby viper.

"Elementary!" Michèle would have commented. "Introductory Psychoanalysis, lesson one!" Agreed. But why just now? Why that particular night?

I woke with clocklike precision at seven twenty. My first thought was of Rendu whom I'd promised to fetch in town, though we hadn't said when. By the time I'd washed, lit a cigarette and put on the water for coffee, I could hear his still's Diesel engine beginning to churn in the shed.

It wasn't yet dawn. He must have walked over while I was still asleep. From the doorway I watched as he backed out of the shed and, standing up at the controls, guided his contraption out onto the driveway.

"The devil take him!" I muttered. Maybe *he* was the witch of Jouff. After all, if he keeps running into the lady at night at the dump or around the sand pits, it simply means he's been prowling there himself. Maybe he even visits her house. He's always the best informed, the first on the spot. Odd, isn't it? And what about the anonymous note sent to police headquarters in Viormes the morning they fished out the drowned man? Someone had to write it and drop it in their mailbox. And the other note, penned by the same hand, which got into the hanged man's shirt

pocket? Who could have climbed up there? Someday I'd find an excuse to ask him casually, off the cuff, out of the blue, "Say, Rendu, how do you spell publicity?" "Well! With two s's, I guess," he'd reply. I'm sure of it!

I returned to my coffee at the kitchen table, continuing to stir my thoughts as I stirred a lump of sugar with the tip of my spoon.

Soon Fabien appeared. He helped himself to black coffee and sat down at the table. He was still half-asleep; he looked tired but content. His little Norwegian bedmate must still have been sleeping, cuddled in an indolent, satiated heap.

I attacked him energetically. "If you plan to park your motorcycle in the garage, you might at least . . ."

"Sure, O.K.," he interrupted nonchalantly. "Say, what were you up to last night? We waited for you . . ."

"You could have tidied up a bit while you were waiting."

Fabien glanced tentatively at the sink and stove, failing to notice any appreciable change in the state of either. He couldn't have cared less. He had no intention of wrestling with menial chores or digesting petty recriminations from his father.

Slicing himself a piece of bread, he smeared it with butter and jam and, to avoid further argument, changed the subject. "Say, who's this woman you were talking about last night, this Mademoiselle B.?"

I was evasive at first, reluctant to expose my doubts

and obsessions. I hid behind Rendu's statements and neighborhood gossip, describing the lady as a benign, slightly dotty spinster to whom the public imputed all kinds of eccentricities. "Villagers are born gossips, you know. Some of the women cross themselves when she passes. Because she's always wearing gloves, they imagine she has webbed hands, like a frog. Or furry claws like a bat. Because she never buys milk from the grocer or the milkman, they say she suckles herself! Ever hear such nonsense?"

I assumed the subject was closed. Much to my surprise, however, Fabien evinced a curiosity far out of proportion to the few bits of information he now possessed. With remarkable intuition and intelligence, he posed the very same questions I had been asking myself for months. Refusing to be lured by illusions, he pressed me for details that might link real events—the strange disappearance of Dr. Bluche, the discovery of the drowned man in the Flanne, the man who hanged himself in the Viormes woods—to popular fancies concerning the relations between those gentlemen and the lady behind the dike. Fabien quickly dismissed the notion that Mademoiselle B. bewitched her victims with a "philter" or "magic brew" designed to instill a craving for death. Nor could he see her as an enchantress with the power to drive men mad. "If you ask me, she must have some sex gimmick," he said, "something kinky that sets them on their ear. You know that time when we were in Hamburg with Stéphane . . ."

And while he regaled me with tales of his adventures among the prostitutes of Sankt Pauli, I began thinking that

he too had the right idea about Mademoiselle B.

The free and easy conversation with my son restored my good spirits. Fabien got up, cleared the coffee cups off the table and rinsed them under the tap. Then he buttered some bread and filled two little stoneware pitchers, one with coffee, the other with warm milk, to take up on a tray to his girl friend.

“Very charming! Beautiful!” I thought. “He’s really a fine boy. A loafer if there ever was one, flunked his baccalaureate and will never pass it now. But so what? He does what he wants, he’s trying to enjoy life, and under pretty difficult conditions . . . His mother never around . . . And me more of a pal than a parent . . . But I’m not going to give him a hard time or set myself up as a sterling example . . .”

As he tidied up, Fabien peered at me knowingly out of the corner of one eye, under the mass of blond hair falling to his shoulders. About to go upstairs with the tray, he turned suddenly and flung at me the question: “You were with the lady last night weren’t you? Don’t tell me you don’t go there too once in a while!”

Good God! The last thing in the world I expected! His voice sounded faintly derisive, distinctly taunting. I got angry. “You’ve got holes in your head Fabien! Either you’re trying to make fun of me or else you don’t know anything about anything. If you think . . .”

“What’s the big fuss? It wouldn’t be that extraspecial.”



As a matter of fact it *would* be extraspecial. So much so, I felt, that I resolved never, never to visit Mademoiselle B.'s house. I preferred to remain in ignorance.

Now I can't deny having had sudden urges to uncover the truth, if only to rid myself of these gnawing doubts. The day of Maugendre's funeral, for example; or last night, when for some unknown reason I kept circling the black house behind the dike. Other nights too, solitary, anxious nights haunted by Michèle's challenge: "Go hop onboard the lady and you'll find out!"

Of course Fabien didn't know all there was to know. I hadn't told him about meeting her in the Vaudeville cemetery; or the fact that the man who hanged himself belonged to the Abbey of Saint-Aubin where suicide confers eternal damnation. I was afraid my son would react the way Michèle had. How blithely, how thoughtlessly they were both sending me to my death, or exposing me to some agonizing revelation. No, I shall not visit Mademoiselle B. I shall never attempt to see her again; I shall expunge her from my memory.

That evening Fabien persisted in renewing his offensive, shifting to a different flank. Apprehensive of being interrogated (politely) about his plans for the future—"Say, what are you expecting to do for the rest of the year, Fabien? Going back to school?"—he stole the march on me.

"Say Dad, you working on a book now?" he inquired at the end of dinner. "What exactly *are* you doing?"

My son was the last person on earth to whom I could admit I was doing nothing, that I'd been waiting patiently since the end of autumn to greet the first snow. In a burst of self-assurance I sketched out for him an essay I proposed to write on Kant and Klee. Kant's name meant something to him; Klee, nothing.

"Who's Klee?" he frowned.

"Klee? Paul Klee? Look, he's probably the greatest painter of our time, maybe the only one who's tried to comprehend what happens to him when he paints. You've never seen *Full Moon*, or *Pep the Bird*, or *Little Girl in Yellow*?"

Fabien gave me no chance to expound. "Oh I get it, you're doing a thing on art, sort of philosophical, huh? Think people'll really read it?"

Obviously he wouldn't. Warming to my topic, I pointed out how one could apply Kant's *Theory of the Form and Principles of the Sensible World* to Klee's luminous art; I traced the theme of exploration and otherness that recurs in selected paintings—all in vain though, since he sat there like an iceberg, one that only boredom could melt. His Norwegian friend was yawning in her chair. Nothing to do but go to bed.

"All right, tomorrow I'll show you some books on Klee. You'll like *Anguish Behind the Window*, it's fabulous. It's . . . Say, I have an original drawing by Klee, a real beauty . . ."

I paused, waiting for some reaction, some enthusiasm, and, when none came forth, I struck back vindictively. "With that motorcycle of yours, you'd have done better to

tour Lucerne and Bern and look at Klees rather than putter around Lapland.”

I’ll never forget the look he shot me. He had turned his chair around after dinner and was straddling it, arms folded over the back, head cocked, chin resting on one wrist. His hair drooped over his face. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, not scornfully but triumphantly, with a sense of indomitable superiority. He sat that way for a few moments, silent and still, watching. At last, in a soft, languid voice, remote, almost somnolent, he commented, “Well if I were in your shoes, instead of puttering around with Kant and this Klee fellow—who isn’t even Cassius Clay . . .”

Idiot!

“. . . I’d write a book about Mademoiselle B. The story really bugs me . . .”

Not this again! After weeks and months of Michèle’s nagging: “You ought to work on something, a book. Do a book for *me*, a really nice book. The story of Mademoiselle B. for instance”; after my reporter friend at the *Dépêche* had been battering away on the same subject; after my editor had been prodding me for months: “You are working on something, my dear Maurice Pons? You’ll have a new book for us soon?”; after all the friends, close or distant, who persist blithely in appending postscripts to their New Year greetings: “May this year not pass without your giving us something to read”; after the literary critics who write to me now and again only to deplore my silence, as if all

the books I've published already don't give them enough to write about: "Topicality, my dear fellow!"; after another phone call just last week from the editor of the *Temps Modernes*: "Don't you have something for one of our next issues?"; after all this, along comes Fabien (God knows on whose account!), this lazy, uneducated, nitwit son of mine, motorcycle champion and superfuckster, with the nerve to give me advice about my own profession.

No, no, and again no! I shall not write, I shall never write, never again—and certainly not about Mademoiselle B. Not a line. The story—but there really is no story—is something I want to forget. It's just the opposite of what I'd like to write. Yvette would agree, and even she nudges me periodically to start a new piece: "Do something amusing, Maurice, you've got a good sense of humor. You've got talent, you know, and I don't say that to everyone." Yes, I know. A lot of good it does me!

I know too that I've resolved once and for all to let this "talent" wither and die, never to write again. I know why, but I won't say. Not to anyone, even Yvette. Michèle least of all. I'll only tell my little sister Blandine, if I ever find her.

Fabien's remark had infuriated me. It struck like a smoldering slap in the face. I felt stripped naked in front of him, every inch of me called to account, stretched on the rack. And that look, that derisive, accusing look. My own look coming at me, from another pair of eyes.

I rose from the table, staggering. I left the kitchen and

went straight to my room without a word. I stretched out on the rug, face to the floor, arms crossed. Violent thoughts assailed me. In a matter of seconds, the swirl of vivid images had welled up inside me, the surge of thoughts was sweeping me out to sea, bringing all the exhilaration and vertigo of a drug "trip."

It took me the longest time to compose myself, to stop the room and rug from pitching like a raft. I clung to its wool fringes with my finger tips. The pounding in my veins subsided. I tried to reason with myself. Why make such a fuss, really? Why work myself into a stew?

I had surfaced. From the kitchen came the clatter of dishes. Fabien and Inge must be clearing the table. Sounds of a conference followed, and of the girl's heavy footsteps mounting the stairs. Then Fabien knocked at my bedroom door and came in.

He seemed surprised to find me stretched crosswise on the rug. "You sleeping or what?"

"No, I'm not sleeping. Just resting. I like to think down here on the rug."

"Oh, 'cause if you're not sleepy neither am I and I thought we could look at some Klee pictures. I'm sure they're great. After what you said . . ."

Lowering himself deliberately onto a cushion at my side, he leaned back against the bookcase. His solicitude stunned me: how easily, how tactfully he had found his own way to make amends, without conventional apologies, without embarrassing or humiliating either of us.

Of course he'd misconstrued the real cause of my upset,

having discerned only the wounded author's pride. So what? Why expect him to decipher my neurotic complexes when even a psychoanalyst would have his hands full?

I got to my knees and, sitting crosslegged, slid the large Klee album off the shelf. The book flipped open automatically to the famous *Portrait of the Scholar*, 1933, private collection, Bern. "Look Fabien, just like me, a beardless elder, withered before his season! An old winter moon astonished to find itself so close to earth. But those eyes, look, two frozen ponds on the lunar surface. Lord, what those eyes have seen! Do you know what Klee said when he lectured at Jena in 1924? 'It's the pictures that look at us.'"

Fabien leafed through the album that stared up at us from the floor. He lingered over *Pep the Bird*, 1925, private collection, Bern. "This may sound crazy again, but don't you think this guy Klee was into drugs? The landscape's a real trip; so are the colors."

Without giving me a chance to reply, although his remark might have initiated an intimate exchange on so many other levels, he added innocently, unaware that it was the one taboo that really drove me to distraction, "See the woman with roots, next to the bird, well that's how I imagine Mademoiselle B."

I shut my eyes for a second, needing no book to recall the luminous outlines of a picture that had haunted me for so long. What truly appalled me, however, was this evidence that the image and legend of the lady behind the dike had captured my son's fancy in so short a time. Even now she had planted an obsession in his unconscious mind, fed by

one or two ambivalent comments from that drunkard Rendu and a few unrelated facts from me.

“That really bugs me,” he had confessed. But why? Only then did I realize that apart from the detective-story aspect of some local happenings, he, like myself, was in quest of some fundamental, arresting truth, as if behind those icy blue eyes or under those white lace gloves, the lady possessed the key to a secret anchored in the hearts of men.

“Love in Latin means *amor*” sprang into my mind. What should I do? What should I say to this boy, so bewildered and tormented beneath his fragile self-confidence, far more vulnerable than I to life’s uncertainties? I shut my eyes, clenched my fists. Don’t get angry. And don’t be obstinate. Don’t antagonize him. Be diplomatic and try not to hurt him, even if it means hurting yourself a little. He’s only a kid. Try to scare him perhaps, to share your own fear with him. Then let him forget all about it, wipe it out of his mind.

I took up his little game. “That’s an idea. You can imagine all sorts of things. Now if you want to know how I see the lady . . .” I turned several pages of the worn album and came to *Anguish Behind the Window*, 1929, property of the Rosengart Gallery, Lucerne. A sinister, witchlike figure appeared and seemed to melt into a wall flecked with coppery rust.

I had never told Fabien or anyone else about having surprised Mademoiselle B. at her window the morning they released the hanging man; that I presumed she had wit-

nessed Dom Matthieu's agony and heard the cry intended for her ears—which filled my own, night after night—before his fatal leap.

“Say, she sure is no beauty,” Fabien commented. “Is that really what she looks like?”

“No one knows for certain. Each person has his own idea of her. But the flaking wall here is just like the outside of her house behind the dike.”

“Oh, that's where she lives? In that place over by the dike?”

Damn! I had an ominous feeling that maybe I'd said too much, said maybe just what I shouldn't have said. I went on hastily, “There's another picture of the lady. But it's kind of scary. Want to see it?”

“Let's have a look.”

I jumped up and went over to the revolving bookcase, which resembled a rectangular wooden cage mounted on a swivel, with cleverly imbricated shelves. A steel slide operated by a brass button controls the stopping and starting motion. It's a very useful and attractive piece which Mother gave me after my father died.

I keep a wide assortment of dictionaries in it, including technical works such as a German-English glossary of hotel management terms, *Colorful French Slang*, and other invaluable reference books. It's all very romantic living out in the country if you come prepared.

In my revolving bookcase, side by side, within easy reach, are the latest *Catalogue of Firearms and Cycles of Saint-Etienne*; a set of film directories; the *Anthology of*



*the Theater Today*; Gaétan Picon's *Panorama of the New Literature* with its marvelous photo of Julien Gracq; *Who's Who*, with my ridiculous biography; the famous Moscow edition of the *History of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R.*; the World Almanac; the dictionary of authors published by La Pléiade, on down to the Planète anthologies and, of course, Ronald Searle's *Cats*—and just as many books that I rarely, if ever, consult, but at least they don't argue with me.

I pulled on the slide, making the shelves rotate like a ferris wheel. On its way round, I reached, almost instinctively, for Volume VIII of the Delpire *Basic Encyclopedia*, containing *The Fantastic Arts* by Claude Roy.

It is, as the title claims, a fantastic book (which I can never thank Claude enough for sending me)—witness the fact that I've been butchering my copy for twelve years, tearing out pages regularly to mount on the wall, slicing off illustrations, snipping out memorable quotations. This is my absolute standard of literary quality, for though I do little reading—even less than writing—I'm an inveterate butcher of the books I love. It's my way of devouring them. Especially poetry, which is meant to be sipped, meant to be snipped.

I sat down again on the cushion next to Fabien and spread Claude's book out on the rug. Among the torn, flapping pages I quickly found what I wanted, the one I'd often elevated, alone and unilaterally, to the place of honor on the main beam of my wall: a reproduction of a seventeenth-century engraving illustrating a treatise on China, by

Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), a German who wrote in Latin. I'll bet Viard had read the Latin original in his drugstore. Not I. But the engraving . . . “Here she is, Fabien, the lady of Jouff as someone imagined her three centuries ago.”

Dreadful, terrifying. With membranous wings outspread like a shroud and pinned to a door with crude nails, the velvety creature without arms or legs resembles a combination of vampire bat and barren female sphinx. Still she's a woman. She has a woman's silken flanks, or rather those of an adolescent girl, the rounded contours and gentle depressions, the firm young breasts, like artichoke buds, planted high on the slopes. She has, in the hollow of her belly, the inevitable, fascinating navel—oh woman, born of woman, perverse and contrary! She has, below her belly, the insidious, shadowy orifice—“Carry me off, train! Transport me, frigate!”—the cleft orifice, pathway to other worlds. A woman, yes . . . with dimpled, slightly feline features, pointed ears, a flat nose, eyes like bitter almonds sunk into the soft down of her forehead. A vision of horror, captivating horror. A creature mutilated yet living, flayed alive and crucified in its own blood.

The room was dark except for the circle of light on the rug from my round Russian desk lamp. Not a sound broke the thick, snug stillness of the house. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees in the park.

Squatting on cushions, Fabien and I gazed spellbound at the haunting, all but obscene image of the fantastic crea-

ture. And I know only too well that what appears “fantastic” simply represents a hyperrealistic projection of our private terrors and secret desires. Three centuries later, I was probably experiencing the same temptations, the same terrors as that obscure illustrator Athanasius Kircher.

My son had reached out warmly to me after dinner by presenting himself voluntarily, just to please me, at my evening art lecture. I felt I ought to return the gesture, to overcome my irrational artistic sensibilities, to expose my wounds. “Listen, Fabien,” I began weakly, running a hesitant finger almost reluctantly along the gray outline of the crucified harpy, “if ever I do as you suggest and decide to write a book on Mademoiselle B., this is the way she’ll be. Not the other way. This is the real one.”

Fabien was enchanted by the idea. “Come on Dad, don’t you think you’re stretching it too far? Vampire stories belong in the movies!”

He bounded up happily, gave me a quick kiss and said he was going to bed. “Let me take the book tonight. I’ll scare Inge out of her wits!”

“Good night. Don’t have any nightmares.”

“Nightmares, ha!” he grinned.

I heard his footsteps on the stair, his bedroom door shut. I went straight to bed and fell asleep instantly.

I woke at seven twenty, conscious of having slept badly. Slowly I collected, like objects scattered over the rug, my thoughts from the night before. They were there, inside my head, as substantial as the sweaters on my bench, as the shoes and socks flung helter-skelter round the fireplace, as the overflowing ashtray on the ancient sewing machine that serves as my night table. I inspected them all with sovereign detachment. Suddenly, from the drowsy depths of memory came a strange sound I must have heard in my sleep. It wasn't the sound of Fabien climbing the stairs or closing his door. It was afterwards. Something else. But it hadn't rained or hailed. Hail at this time of year! Still, it *was* like a rumble, a staccato rattle, like auto backfire . . . My God, the motorcycle!

I leapt out of bed and ran to the window, yanking the curtain aside. A menacing dawn. A skimpy, washed-out winter morning, the sky still dark; damp, chilling mist drifting along the ground. The haze was thicker over the Flanne, which cut a pearly passageway between black skeletons of trees. Throwing on last night's clothes, I rushed out to the garage: the motorcycle was gone. "Stolen! Someone stole it during the night!" Clinging to a notion I didn't really believe, I ran back to the house and upstairs, pausing outside my son's room.

With pounding heart, I eased the door open. The bedside lamp was still on, casting light on as charming and tranquil a scene as any seventeenth-century French draughtsman, or Renoir himself, might have longed to capture: across the barely ruffled bed, her blond hair cascading over the pillow, one arm folded and the hand pressed against her cheek, lay Inge, half nude and fast asleep under the flowered comforter. No sign of Fabien.

I rushed downstairs again, like a madman, and back to the garage, my anxiety yielding now to dire certainty. "You fool!" I shouted to the desolate park. "You little fool!" I screamed at the black trees. A pair of fat pigeons took to the air, noisily flapping their wings.

I jumped into my car and raced the motor. Never run your automobile even twenty yards with a cold engine is a cardinal precept of the Kovachs manual: "You turn on the ignition, you eat your breakfast, and only then do you drive off." To hell with the engine! I put my foot down on the gas and sped up the driveway, heading for town. "Just so I get there in time!" was all I could think. "God, just so I get there in time!"

Up on the road it was nearly daybreak. Lights shone in several houses. Monsieur Max's tavern was open; so was the grocery. I roared through the intersection after a hasty glance to the left and right. Today of all days it wouldn't do to lock wheels with the milk truck. Crossing the highway, I shot off along the dike road.

What in God's name did he have to go there for? I

asked myself, steadying the wheel as the car jolted in and out of ruts. Why couldn't he be happy just to screw his little girl friend? What did he have to come here for? What's got into his head?

I was furious and I was frantic.

The sky was turning milky gray. My headlights groped through a curtain of fog. Luckily, I knew the way by heart, each twist and turn. I sped along the wheel ruts like a train on its tracks.

I was angry at my son, and even angrier at myself. Where had he got this craze, a craze for images, more dangerous at his age than any narcotic? "A sex gimmick," he'd called it, the little idiot. But how did he get her address? Yes, now I remember, when I mentioned the dike—dammit—I'd felt then the cold breath of Dame Distress. Dammit, dammit!

No, it wasn't possible! If anything *should* happen . . . No, nothing will happen . . . it's impossible, I'll get there in time. I'll drive right up to the house, bang on the shutters, I'll shout, I'll break in and drag my boy out of there . . . And I won't let go of him, not for anything, I'll fasten myself to him with ropes if need be . . . Yes, I'll get him out of there . . . That floozie won't catch me this time, with her winsome ways, her frills and frippery. Her communicant's gloves.

Too late . . . I was only five hundred yards from the house when, straight ahead through the windshield, I saw the faint beam of the motorcycle surging up the fogbound slope. Sure enough, it was my son Fabien. I was right: he'd

been there. The fool! At least he was alive. Alive and sound. So nothing was lost yet.

I slowed down and inched over to the right, then stopped the car and got out. I had to talk to him immediately. But when he passed right by me . . .

“Fabien! Fabien!” I cried, flinging out my arms in the roadway.

It was as if he hadn't seen me. He rode by at a steady clip, with no sign of recognition. I noticed at once that he wasn't wearing his helmet, that tough plastic shell I had bought him along with the machine and which he never failed to buckle on, even for short sprints into town for cigarettes. We had made a bargain: he was never to ride the motorcycle without his helmet. Nor did he have on his gauntlets and leather jacket; only a pullover and the long Norwegian scarf trailing about his neck.

Then I saw his eyes—just for an instant, behind the swirl of windswept hair tumbling over his face. They were wild eyes, remote, haggard, with a glint I can only describe as “unearthly.” Eyes that had glimpsed, even momentarily, what no one must ever see. The same look that was on Marie-Claire's pale face when, resolved to die, she had placed her hand on my arm in Madame Ham's tavern and said very quietly, “Come with me, we'll go together . . .” The same look that was stamped on Maugendre's placid features in the identity photo on his driver's license, dripping wet from the Flanne, face up on the kitchen table.

A new rush of anger caught me, a new surge of an-

guished foreboding. "Fabien!" I shouted frantically, "Wait for me! Wait!"

He didn't hear. He was racing toward town, lost in the engine's roar.

Sliding back into the car in a state close to panic, I tried to make a U-turn on the narrow dirt lane. Reverse . . . forward . . . reverse. I should have gone straight ahead and turned at the roundabout near the dike. The wheels skidded on the dewy grass; the underside scraped the ground. I had to catch Fabien before he got to Jouff, had to stop him, had to talk to him at once. And I couldn't. The maneuver had cost me a minute; now he was streaking down the road far ahead of me. I speeded up to 6000 rpm's, in third. Any faster and I'd blow myself to bits.

When the first houses came into view—by now a wan sun had risen—I spotted in the distance two little fiery balls, his rear lights. Then the brake light glowed for a few seconds. He had stopped at the intersection. If only I could zoom along in high for a spell there was still a chance of catching him as he passed through Jouff.

Damn! Up ahead, at the entrance to town, Rendu—him again!—was backing his still out of the driveway onto the road. I barely had time to shift into first and come to a screeching halt a few yards from the machine blocking my path. The car heaved and steamed. I quivered with rage. Through the open window I signalled frantically to the street cleaner and with unwonted rudeness. "Jesus Christ man! Get your ass out of the way!"



But he simply smirked at me, totally unimpressed, his sailor's cap tilted over one eye. He jumped down from the still and sauntered over. "Hullo there, Monsieur Pons. Something wrong? What's got into you?"

"For pity's sake, move aside. Hurry! It's my son Fabien . . . He's been to visit the lady."

I must have been pale and trembling. Rendu stared at me deliberately with a—how should I say it?—quizzical look. Without a word, he climbed back up onto his still and pulled it off the road.

I shot past him and reached the intersection. The street in front of me was empty; only the milk truck with Francis loading jugs in the yard outside the Hotaux dairy. To the right, along the highway, nothing in sight as far as the Vaudeville turn-off. But to the left, way off, in the right lane, just before the bridge over the Flanne, I could barely distinguish, in the hazy dawn light, a motorcyclist bound for Viormes. I dashed off in pursuit.

Was it Fabien? What was he after in Viormes? Suddenly I thought of Dr. Bluche who was said by Quérolles to have vanished in the same manner, along the same route, driving back one morning from a visit to the lady.

But this time it was I. Fabien could never outrun me on this broad stretch of asphalt. My car was faster, the gas tank full. I'd keep going as long as I had to. If necessary, I'd alert the highway police for the whole region. We'd catch him in the end.

I streaked over the bridge spanning the Flanne and on across the unbarred grade crossing. Just then I recalled

hearing that Dr. Bluche had gone home before leaving town. Could Fabien simply have gone home? He could have got away from me beyond the intersection in Jouff, behind Francis' truck, and turned right into the narrow lane leading to the Margotte farm. In which case I should have driven straight through town. Perhaps the chase was all in vain.

No. Ahead, on the long hill down to Viormes, past the turn-off, I spotted my boy braced in the saddle. This time it was surely he. I could see him distinctly, hair streaming in the wind, wrapped in his beige pullover and long wool scarf. But he must have been tearing along like a rocket, since I was trailing him in high with all the speed I could muster and gaining no ground. "Where is he going? Where?" I kept muttering. To what urgent appointment? He could have stopped by the house on the way . . .

On he raced, with a will of iron, when suddenly . . .

Suddenly, up ahead where the elevated expressway was under construction, I saw him veer to the right, then swerve out across the lane in a wide arc and come crashing like an artillery shell into the concrete pillar. Deliberately. Yes. He'd done it deliberately. No! No!

It took me nearly two hundred yards to come to a stop, pumping on the brake like a madman, trying to steady the car as it zigzagged crazily down the hill. Anguish and horror tore me apart. My nails had dug pits in the leather wheel casing. I backed up like a shot to where the pillar stood, flung open the door and dashed to my son's side.

Dame Distress had kept the appointment. The reader will forgive me for not describing the ghastly spectacle that met my eyes; only Shakespeare could find words to express its horror. Fabien's body, that beautiful, lithesome young body which graced the earth; Fabien's face, which even till yesterday bore such promise of happiness; Fabien's hands, perhaps nature's most exquisite creation—all reduced to gushing viscera, a shapeless mass of organs.

Kneeling at his side in the muddy construction site, I was so overcome with nausea that I began spewing up viscous bile, trying vainly to catch it in my hands before it spurted over us both. Convulsions shook me; I trembled, I heaved. I think I must have blacked out for an instant. But just before that, I remember glancing up at the gory splatter flung onto the pillar from my son's impact: an oozing trail which outlined, oddly enough, in crimson against the white concrete, the quivering head of a horse with flaring nostrils and tossing mane.

It stands there today, blackened, dried out and peeling, though the expressway has been finished and the cement pier fenced off by a protective barrier. If some motorist should happen to stop in this desolate spot along the road to Viormes, I defy him to suppose there is any connection between this strange horse's head and the roving spirit of my son; or between this one and the horse Antonin Rendu, Jouff's blacksmith, painted white on red above his entryway.

When I came to—I couldn't have blacked out for more

than a few seconds—I sensed a circle of silent attendants hovering over me. High boots, laced boots, trouser legs, planted motionless in the mud: the construction crew had rushed down, aghast at the accident they had witnessed from the overpass. Several cars had pulled up along the roadside.

“Hurry! Hurry!” I pleaded without looking up. “He’s not dead. Call an ambulance.”

“We’ve done it; they’re coming,” said a male voice behind me.

“Do you know the fellow?” a second voice asked.

“He’s my son,” I heard myself answer, “my son Fabien. He’s not dead.”

No one said a word after that. The circle closed around this pitiful Pietà. I continued to stare at my son’s shattered face, a gaping wound steeped in hair and blood, the eyes two mere slits beneath tumid lids. I looked desperately for some glimmer, some flutter of life, but couldn’t bring myself, couldn’t find the strength to raise those bleeding eyelids. I clasped one limp hand in mine, convinced that it was warm, that a faint pulse still throbbed.

Once the ambulance arrived, with a patrol car close behind, things moved rapidly. Friendly hands raised me to my feet and drew me aside. White-coated stretcher-bearers took up the mangled body, covering it with a sheet and placing it in the ambulance. I climbed in beside them and we left at once for Viormes.

The driver had turned on his siren, three notes I always

think of as the song of Dame Distress.

How many miles have I traveled, how many cities have I seen—Paris, London, Moscow, New York—with that wailing warble throbbing in my ears while I clasped some dainty little cold, or burning, hand. Under the circumstances I had no heart to recall old memories, some of which, I can now admit, were frankly hilarious. Under the circumstances, I wouldn't even have heard it except for a distinct impression I had that Fabien's face, which I continued to scrutinize after an attendant had sponged it off, reacted ever so faintly to the siren's shrill complaint.

I thought his eyelids fluttered, that he was trying desperately to squeeze them open a tiny bit further, as a deaf person wrinkles up his eyes in the effort to hear. This happened several times in as many minutes. Then I thought I saw his lips start to tremble, as if at last my son had sensed my presence and was making one last superhuman attempt, far beyond his strength, to communicate a word, an urgent, burdensome message. I can't say that I actually heard any articulate sound, but in watching his lips, I think I was able to read the word "fool." Or "fire" perhaps, yes, "fire."

"Don't talk, Fabien," I whispered, "it doesn't matter. Calm yourself . . . Rest."

The attendant, who injected him with a second dose of the white intravenous solution, looked at me oddly, frowning.

By the time we reached the hospital, I knew Fabien was dead.

The stretcher-bearers transferred him all the same onto

a guernsey which they wheeled off to Dr. Fauchon in the emergency unit. They left me to wait outside the door, in the deserted anteroom carpeted with blue linoleum. I sat down in a straight chair, frozen and still trembling with emotion. The hospital was warm and still. A nurse brought me a blanket and gradually I began to relax.

I know Dr. Fauchon very well; he knows me even better. Not that he has read my books—do doctors ever have time to read books?—but because he has excavated every crevice of me.

The winter when I was deathly ill with a putrid infection that spread all over my body, shivering with fever in my dank little hole, they took me to the hospital. He looked after me and we became rather good friends. I felt miserable at the time, depressed and lonely after Marie-Claire had gone. Broke too. I felt awful not being able to pay my bill and, in despair, imagined myself proceeding, like Aurélien, from the hospital to prison.

I remember sending out SOS's all over. One Paris publisher, whom I shall refrain from naming as it would be too embarrassing—to him—a major publisher for whom I had recently worked my fingers to the bone on a very taxing assignment, sent me a check for sixty francs and twenty-seven centimes, the balance due me, according to his bookkeeper, with apologies for not being able to offer more substantial help. I know now that the publication in question made him millions.

The doctor was more compassionate and arranged for

me to postpone payment of my hospital bill. But let this millionaire publisher hear the end of the story, and may certain of his colleagues, certain magazine directors or editors, certain ravenous cashiers of the state and other agencies of organized ransom, heed the lesson: when I finally collected some money later on and wanted to pay the village nurse who, throughout the month following my operation, came to the house three times a week, rain or shine, to give me injections, she said to me, "Don't mention it, Monsieur Pons. You are a writer, a poet. If you'd be good enough to autograph one of your books for me, that would be ample payment."

That was long ago and I've had no cause to revisit the surgical ward. But on the morning I speak of, I was in no frame of mind to even notice a familiar place. I had a vague sense of sitting in death's waiting room. I knew simply that the messenger would be Dr. Fauchon with his crew cut, his white short-sleeved coat, his thin steel-rimmed glasses. I felt curiously calm and, for what reason or what purpose I don't know, resolved.

The doctor came out of the emergency room. I got up. He strode over and shook my hand. "He's dead, my poor friend," he told me immediately, in his own reserved but cordial manner, "we can't do a thing for him."

I knew it already, I knew that you don't revive a beetle squashed against the windshield at a hundred miles an hour. The only trace it leaves is an amber spot that you sponge off.

I blinked my eyes; the waiting room swayed gently. A row of potted palms stood in front of the window. My two friends from the police station were there, caps in hand, talking in hushed voices behind a post. I hadn't noticed them before; perhaps they arrived just after us and didn't want to trouble me.

The doctor had walked off to attend to other matters. The crepe soles on his suede shoes squeaked like wet kisses on the damp linoleum. I caught up with him in the corridor, clasping his arm in a friendly yet urgent grip. "I want to know something, doctor," I said, hollow-voiced, my eyes visibly alarming him, "I want to know why he died. He killed himself deliberately, you know. Deliberately."

Dismay spread over the surgeon's face. Why had I come up with that appalling diagnosis? Not a flicker of sarcasm, or compassion, or skepticism on his features; my certainty shook him. He couldn't guess what I was about to ask. He said nothing. He waited. I resolved to take the bull by the horns. "I want to know if my son made love last night."

Fauchon all but exploded. His cheeks turned scarlet. He must have been Catholic, on top of being a doctor and hopelessly tangled in problems of morality, of ethics, of professional secrecy, of respect for the dead, and god knows what else. He took a step forward, with me clinging to his arm. I stepped forward too; I wouldn't let him go.

After a pause—and who knows what went through his head? I won't try to guess for it doesn't really matter—he turned and looked me straight in the eye as if to say that he would concede this irregular but legitimate request. With



a nod to indicate that I should wait there, he disappeared once again into the emergency room, returning shortly to say, "Yes, I think so. Mostly likely early this morning."

Unimpeachable. Irrefutable. Irresistible. This single piece of evidence, though not conclusive, did at least make everything possible and plausible. A loathing for life sprang to my mind: in a flash I saw Fabien astride his machine, utter disgust written on his face, hair streaming in the wind, racing to his death.

Whirling around, I rushed at the gendarmes like a madman, frantically grabbing at them. "*She* killed him, I'm sure of it, I can prove it. We've got to get there right now! Right away! Hurry! She ought to be hanged! She's the one!"

I shouted, I screamed, I sobbed, I choked. Dauphin and Clairout looked at me pityingly, without understanding what it all meant, exchanging glances with the doctor. "I tell you Fabien visited the lady last night. Over by the dike. Mademoiselle B."

At this, the two officers put on their caps and silently escorted me out the door.

I climbed into their car, deliberately choosing the back seat. They sat in front, Dauphin at the wheel, and we pulled out of the hospital driveway.

The town was just coming to life: shops opening, people hurrying to work. I sat fretting in my corner. None of us said a word. Just as we reached the traffic circle opposite the post office, I had an idea. "Let's go past Frétigny's

place," I told the sergeant. "We ought to bring the judge along."

The two gendarmes exchanged glances. Dauphin drove round the traffic circle and out to the left, toward the avenue. Once embarked on this strange expedition, they could hardly object to the company of a legal officer. Not until we drew up in front of the judge's brand new villa did Clairout voice reluctance. "The trouble is we've had no complaint. I wonder if I should barge in cold like this . . ."

"Tell him I asked you to come, that I'm waiting outside in the car."

Anguish and grief had infused me with unnatural authority. Clairout got out, swung open the garden gate and walked up the porch steps where he rang the doorbell. Dauphin and I waited in silence. I tried to remain calm, to keep from planning out our course of action. I didn't want to think what I would say when I finally confronted the lady.

"Do you have a cigarette?" I asked Dauphin.

He didn't smoke but reached into the glove compartment for his chief's tobacco pouch. "Here, maybe you can roll one."

I didn't really know how. The scuffle between gummed paper and tobacco shreds offered a welcome relief from the tension. I managed at last to light something faintly resembling a cigarette. Puffs of acrid smoke filled the damp interior. Clairout emerged from the house followed by Frétigny, wearing his hat and wriggling into his overcoat.

He sat in back with me; I gave his outstretched hand

a perfunctory shake. That singsong voice of his then proceeded to spout platitudes as if reeling off a sermon, a pre-digested message, without inflection, without warmth. "I have just heard about the tragic death of your son. Please accept my heartfelt condolences. Be assured that . . ."

I wasn't listening. I simply wanted him present and silent. He obliged me shortly when we plunged into open country, only to begin anew in much the same vein. "I didn't know you had a grown son. Are you married? Or were you?"

"What an ass!" I thought, "what a pompous ass! I guess no one ever told him you don't have to marry to have children." I shrugged my shoulders and didn't bother to reply. Hunched in a corner, I pretended to weep, hoping he would leave me alone. The tears came easily, then the sobs.

They got worse as we drove under the overpass. I couldn't help staring at the tragic pillar. The debris from Fabien's motorcycle littered the construction site, where my car sat waiting.

Dauphin never slowed down. After crossing the bridge over the Flanne, he drove through Jouff and out onto the dike road, advancing cautiously now, almost at a crawl.

"Isn't this where they discovered the hanging?" Frétigny felt obliged to remark.

Clairout, sitting in front of him, merely nodded his head by way of confirmation.

The judge obviously didn't know where we were going or what we meant to do in the secluded house behind the dike. I wasn't sure what the sergeant had told him but as-

sumed that he had come along purely out of politeness.

“Well, he’s in for a surprise!” I told myself. He and the rest of us were going to burst in on Mademoiselle B. And he’ll have to listen because she’s going to talk, willing or not. I was determined to get what I wanted. Even if it sent me to prison. Something had to be done to render her harmless. She would talk . . . she would confess. We were about to learn the truth.

The wreckage of the house still smoldered beneath a fine drizzle. I couldn’t believe my eyes: flames had gutted the structure from cellar to rafters, on up through the slate roof which had caved in. A thick, sooty paste coated the four walls. The windows and the door with its iron shutter had exploded, leaving black rectangular perforations in the facade.

The shattered face of my dying son flashed before me: “The fire . . . the fire . . .” he was trying to tell me, after which the lady’s soft, oddly guttural voice floated out from the ruins, just as I had heard it the first time, so long ago, through the barred doorway: “Come in, sir, don’t stand out in the rain.” Through the French door her gloved hand had reached out with queenly grace.

I sprang from the car, which had stopped outside the house on the pebbly turnaround littered with seared roof tiles and charred timbers. I rushed to the entrance and, despite clouds of smoke inside, stepped over the threshold.

Here beneath the collapsed roof was the lady's abode. No furniture, yet the strangest assortment of items: chests, cages, helmets, candelabra; a clutter of scorched fabrics mixed in with utensils, flasks, odd pieces of silverware and brass egg cups.

I noticed at once in the corner a tall, slender, translucent vase nearly three feet high and lavender-tinted, around which, snakelike, coiled a vine of morning glories. It was a hand-blown vase such as the glassmaker Emile Gallé created a century ago in Nancy, and I recall my mother priding herself on possessing the only one of its kind.

At first that struck me as sheer coincidence; on further thought, however, I recognized it not only as a sign but as the very essence of my quest, of my temptations, of my terrors, which, in sending my son to his doom, I had expiated at great cost.

I stood speechless in this strange abode, for the lady's dwelling turned out to be an indoor garden as well. Plants everywhere; grasses, shrubs, creepers—mostly creepers: ivy, honeysuckle, morning glories, tendrils reaching across the floor into the corners, snowballs clinging to blackened walls, climbing toward the rafters, their downy blossoms and shrivelled leaves claimed by the fire.

More than a house, it was an arbor, a burned-out arbor beneath the smoke-filled vault of which still swirled pollen-bearing ashes, sprigs, feathery tufts and wisps. There were bats everywhere, nests full of terrorized fruit bats and

barbastelles evicted at dawn from their hiding places and left wheeling about, uttering their shrill squeaks above the billowing smoke and tongues of flame.

Behind me the judge stood at the entrance and was speaking with the two policemen. "What kind of a place is this? No one could have lived here."

Neither Dauphin nor Clairout attempted to reply. Not for a minute did any of us consider poking through the debris overrun with trailing vegetation, rats and bats for traces of human life.

In turning to leave, I stepped on a strange object that had escaped the flames: a pair of brass embroidery hoops shaped like an omega, made to fit one inside the other by adjusting a pair of screws. I picked it up. It was coated with soot. I knew perfectly well where it came from and what it meant. But what on earth could I prove, and to whom, with this slender piece of evidence? And what good would it do? I flung it angrily into the wreckage.

As I reached the car, I heard Frétigny talking to the sergeant in a whisper. "Listen, you must know Pons pretty well. He's not quite all there in the head—from living alone so much in that shack of his—I think what happened to his son must have shocked him out of his senses . . ."

The snow came at last, thick and fast and inexorable. All night long it fell onto the bare, expectant earth, and this morning, with frost and ice crystallizing the branches, all nature is in the throes of some white madness. What a lesson is taught by earth's divestiture and adornment; earth denudes herself only to adorn herself with the sky. I should have taken the car out and driven all night, trapping in the headlights' glare the whirling white fireflies descending from heaven knows where, intoxicated by their hoary revels.

On opening the bedroom curtains, I felt a thrill of joy, a sense of resurrection. The fire had died in the night leaving the room damp and chilly, yet I didn't bother to revive it. I flung open the window and the door. I was outside, I was gone.

For weeks now I've existed in a state verging on prostration, lying motionless on the rug, surrounded by birch logs that fill the room.

Fabien was buried in the public cemetery in Jouff. Impossible to reach his mother, detained as much by the cease-fire in Vietnam as by four years of war. Her real children are Hanoi's young soldiers, and that's as it should be.

Nor did I summon Michèle, or Serge, or Jean-Pierre, or anyone. As for Inge, I packed her off to Norway at once,

though I suppose she lingered in Paris to look up friends.

The whole town came to the funeral on a cold rainy afternoon. There was Madame Pautard, Madame Volange, the postmistress, the schoolmaster with some of his pupils, Quérolles of course, and Rendu in that jacket of his that makes him look like a customs inspector, with his cap rolled up in one hand; Madame Fijutte was there too, dressed in black, adding my grief to her own on top of two recent tooth extractions. No priest, thankfully. And no sermon; only a shower of red and white blossoms about the open grave. The police from the Viormes precinct came as well as the firefighters from Jouff, who appeared, I can't imagine why, en masse and in uniform, with their pennant at half-mast and their bugles, which they never blew. Too overwhelmed perhaps.

There was no handshaking either, thank heavens, for I had dislocated a finger and was afraid I might have to suffer needlessly for the sake of convention.

After the gravediggers had filled the trench and everyone had filed out silently, probably to gather in Monsieur Max's tavern and discuss the event over a glass of wine—"That poor Monsieur Pons, so kind, and not a haughty man . . . How handsome that boy of his was. Oh, those motorcycles"—I stayed on alone in the drizzle, squatting on my heels before the mound of flowers marking my son's grave.

I forced myself to think of him. I could see baby pictures, snapshots of the little boy I walked to school and



called for at four o'clock, with his afternoon snack in my pocket. Pictures of our trip to the Pyrenees and mule rides through the mountains. I remembered the day he lost his raincoat with his watch in the pocket, his first wristwatch. And his rapture at finding it. The visit to Dr. Bluche when he went wild over the ceramic rabbits and mushrooms in the garden. I remembered how furious he'd been, how outraged at flunking his exams. And the wonderful poker game when, at daybreak, over a full house with aces, he managed to worm that Japanese motorcycle out of me. He had cheated during the deal, adroitly slipping himself the second jack. I saw it and said nothing.

My thoughts, in fact, or should I say the flow of images through my mind, concentrated entirely on this flower-strewn grave, now rain-sodden. I couldn't help feeling somehow that among the drenched bouquets, one was missing: a sheaf of mountain ash, its tender, leafy boughs heavy with red berries, which the white lady had once come here to toss, one by one.

However there had not been the slightest sign of Mademoiselle B. since the day her house burned down. Not a bone, not a shadow, not a flickering candle at the public dump. You would think, as did Judge Frétigny, that she had never existed. Or only in the collective fantasies of a godless town, a bastion of heresy and materialism, rich in cabalistic lore. Or again perhaps in the unconscious phantasms of a solitary, aging writer.

Nevertheless. Yes, nevertheless, she was the one I was

waiting for, watching for in the rain-drenched cemetery. I knew she would come. She'd neither died nor flown away, and as Madame Pautard would say: as long as a person's death is not entered in the register . . .

Had she returned to her father's old shanty, infested with brambles and bats, on the edge of the Viormes woods? Was she waiting at this very minute in my room, sitting on my bench, the tea cloth spread out in her lap, plying her needle with gloved hand?

Dusk fell softly in the garden of gravestones. It was still drizzling. I was frozen and shivering but could not tear myself away from the silent contemplation of that square plot of flower-strewn mud. I was riveted there as if awaiting some fatal, futile rendezvous.

I heard steps on the gravel driveway. It was nearly dark. I didn't dare turn around. I didn't move a muscle. I simply bowed my head slightly, letting the rain caress the back of my neck.

She would walk up to me, she would place her gloved hand on my head, she would glide three fingers under the collar of my sweater and stroke the nape of my neck with her finger tips. I had only to wait. I closed my eyes. I shivered.

The steps halted several yards away. Allowing a few more seconds, I opened my eyes and turned around.

No, it was not Mademoiselle B. In the dusky cemetery

I discerned a yellow helmet and a shadowy profile. It was a fireman from the Jouff brigade on his way home after a stop at the Quérolles bar. He must have spotted me over the low wall. He stood planted there, reluctant to break the silence.

“You shouldn’t stay out like this, Monsieur Pons; you’ll catch cold,” he ventured at last in a booming voice, with a warm smile. “And what good can it do anyway?”

He helped me to my feet and walked me out to my car, which was back on the church road in front of the school. “Should I drive you home? Will you be all right?”

Yes, I was all right. I thanked him and went home. No one had been there in my absence. No one came in the days ahead.

I’m not sure how long I remained prostrate on my rug or wandering about the house like a sleepwalker. I must have eaten, I must have smoked, drank, and slept, I must have lit the fire because I’m still here, alive, sitting on my bench in front of my work table. I must have done some writing too, because the table is strewn with sheets of paper covered with tightly woven lines of my own tiny pen strokes. What tale can I have had to tell?

I’ll check on that later. Right now, this morning, I only know the snow has come, bringing frost and ice, and that I tremble with joy.

I’ll hop into my car and race along narrow snow-

covered lanes, skidding at every turn. The white dawn is about to break. I wish I were far away, somewhere else. I'll cut through the valley and pick up the old highway flanking the railway tracks. With luck, I'll meet a white train passing, whistling into the frosty air.





Maurice Pons was born in Strasbourg in 1927. He was educated in Paris, where he began his career as a writer and play-director. In 1955 he was awarded the Grand Prix de la Nouvelle for his book *Virginales*. The first of Pons's novels to appear in English, *Rosa*, was published in the U.S. in 1972. Pons has translated into French works by Jerzy Kosinski, Norman Mailer, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

Maurice Pons now lives in an old windmill in Normandy.

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