THREE FRENCH MURDER MYSTERIES

Roger Dickinson-Brown

She celebrated a way of life.

- Sebastian Harrington, speaking of the Baroness Blixen

THE CITY
An Old-Fashioned Paris Murder Mystery

Miniver Lafritte turned uncomfortably in his beige leather director's chair. Twenty floors below him lay the Seine, winding through La Défense, the Paris business sector that looks like an especially modern Manhattan. The silver-shining river snaked among dozens of fine shops and better restaurants in the adjacent, chic suburb of Neuilly, and Miniver liked what he saw.

It was a hot day for the month of April, by Paris standards. The air conditioning turned the stale air endlessly within the building, and Miniver's 260 pounds, though hung on a big frame, were not meant for comfortable days in the office. He lamented once again having taken space in this wretched modern tower, knowing perfectly well that he had made the mistake because of the striking view. The late afternoon sun caught the gold rims of his thick glasses.

Miniver Lafritte was not exactly working, not the way his mother said was working, though he himself might have said he was. He was fussing over a small glass of 1989 sauternes, *château bastor-la-montagne*, which had warmed to the wrong temperature, and which he thought too young to drink anyway. He was smoking a small, cheap cigar that he rather liked.

Two books, one in French, one in English, were open on the table next to the ice-bucket, out of any obvious relation to his work: a new edition of one of the novels of Balzac, and a large tome of the economic extrapolations of Angus Maddison.

Neither volume was retaining his attention at the moment. Miniver had once again made the mistake of reading a newspaper, and had come across yet more statistics. Now he was railing, in silence as usual, against the Miserable Modern World. The occasion for his unhappiness was a set of recent figures on the triple plague of promiscuity, divorce and abortion in this vale of tears.

On the first two of these counts an objective observer would have found Miniver Lafritte seriously wanting, in good part because of his five wives. On the latter he came off rather better because of his seven beloved children. But Miniver was not thinking about himself. He was thinking about the degenerate world, about the heat, and about a botched glass of sauternes; and in any case Josianne was buzzing him.

How he had chosen such a slob for a second assistant only God and Miniver knew. The motive had been pure: no more luscious secretaries with half-opened blouses who keep you from your work and your books and even your sauternes. But with Josianne he got not only a nasal voice and crass reflections; he also got the short skirts and half-buttoned clothes of a thoroughly unattractive young woman. It was all more distracting than the luscious peaches he had learned to do without, though Josianne was exceptionally good at her work, if at nothing else, and he had after all hired her for her work. She was a very clever slob. Nonetheless, in her bulging, vulgar way she made him pay dearly for her devotion and her competence.

Old Madame Lacrone, on the other hand, was efficient, orderly, discreet and wise. And the two women, in their different fashions, knew a great deal about Franco-Anglo-American business; that left Miniver free for books and sauternes.

In the time it took to announce Jack Longman on the phone from New York, Josianne committed two grammatical mistakes and two *vulgarités*. But a call from Jack Longman was worth it, and Miniver seized the phone.

“Spring and sun and now you, Jack! Can I hope you’re coming over?”

“I’m comin’ over. Charles de Gaulle tomorrow morning at ten-twenty, if my ticket’s confirmed. On the Concorde. The drinks are better and I don’t have time to get drunk.”

“How long can you stay?”

"Depends. I'm coming for business, of course, or Jane wouldn't let me out. Ever heard of Chester du Maine?"

Miniver reflected. "Sure. English. Anglo-French import-export. Exotic and luxury foods. Didn't he die recently?"

Jack laughed. "Nothing escapes you and your gut. Yeah, he died last week, and we're stuck with damn near two hundred million French francs in life insurance we wrote on him, and nobody's very sure how he died. Before we pay out, we have to know what happened. Can you help?"

"That's your field more than mine, Jack."

"You've done it before and you know I hate this kind of thing. You love it, Miniver."

"I'll find out what I can."

"Thanks. Meet me if you're free. We'll go over the details at lunch and find out if Maxim's has declined as much as they say."

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Miniver put down the phone and did not take up his glass of sauternes. He was now thinking business, as his mother always said he always should. He buzzed in Josianne and Mme. Lacrone.

The latter shuffled in in an efficient flash, though how anybody could shuffle in a flash was beyond Miniver, even after eighteen years with the old dear. Her clothes were fresh and perfectly in place, pen and pad in hand; the formality they had preserved over the years could almost be touched. "*Oui, m'sieur*."

Miniver waited for Josianne. She rushed in three or four minutes later, a bit hot and sweaty, three fingernails dirty – Miniver counted them – the back of her blouse hanging out, her big unlovely breasts bursting a button or two. Like a lot of overweight people, but not like Miniver, Josianne seemed psychologically unprepared to wear the oversized clothes she needed. The contrast with Miniver's own impeccably tailored mass was stark. Josianne had forgotten her pen, her paper and her cigarettes, so they waited a little longer.

Mme. Lacrone cackled, in her good-natured way; Josianne often made her older colleague cackle. It occurred to Miniver that Mme. Lacrone's two main extraprofessional activities appeared to be shuffling and cackling. Three, if you counted being good-natured.

"Where's Gérard?" Gérard was Miniver's jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none, the company dogsbody.

"Gone to see his cousin, who knows the secretary of the chief of police, m'sieur. Some sort of problem with parking tickets, I believe."

Miniver fairly roared. "Parking tickets? We don't even have a car any more!"

Mme. Lacrone cackled. "Precisely, m'sieur. And they do accumulate. I'm sure he'll be back soon."

"He'd better be," said Miniver, not for a moment imagining that he would.

The old and only car among them, a dented Mercedes, might have acquired fewer parking tickets if it had not almost always been parked. Now it had been towed away. Miniver was working himself into another hot project to fire his only useless employee when Josianne plumped into the chair beside him. The subject changed.

"Right. We're opening a new file with International Business Insurance. Start the usual expense account. The fees will be determined later. Mr. Longman is flying in tomorrow. Has either of you heard of Chester du Maine?"

Josianne's already flushed cheeks brightened. "Of Best Chester? Anglo-French foods? Ain't he dead? I thought he was real cute. A bit fat and middle-aged but I just adored his English *moustaches* and his classy three-piece suits and he was always good for a laugh, and of course it didn't hurt what with his being so rich." Josianne spoke twice as fast as most people do.

Miniver stared, remembering why he employed her. "How can you possibly know all this about Chester du Maine?"

"My ex-husband's cousin used to go out with him. He wasn't at all *snob*. He'd go out with anybody."

"Indeed," thought Miniver. "Do you know anything else about him?"

"Not much. I only met him two or three times. But I can find out plenty."

"Do." Miniver turned to Mme. Lacrone. "And you, madame. Do you know anything about Chester du Maine?"

Mme. Lacrone looked reflective and serious. She was born reflective and serious and had remained so, except when cackling. "I've heard the name. I can find out.

My sister-in-law's best friend is the secretary of the marketing director of one of their competitors. It's a small world."

A small world indeed. Miniver sat back and lit up a new cigar – a fat, illegal-in-the-U.S. Cuban montecristo, this time, because he knew he was going to be able to afford it, and better. He began again to think about the right temperature for his next glass of sauternes.

That was the beauty of working in France: providing information and contacts to the French-in-America and the Americans-in-France, and doing anything else the team could scrape up. It ensured them all a comfortable, if unstable, living. All you needed was the right nationality, an elegant office, a bit of savvy and a lot of cousins. *Vive la France!*

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Jack Longman was late. Every time he took the Concorde it was late, and every time he took it he complained about the cramped seats and the bad food. But every time he came to Paris he took it, because everything else was worse, because it was the only passenger plane that flew faster than the speed of sound, and because he was something of a snob. And because his company paid for the ticket.

Seeing each other again was a joy for the two friends, now in their forties, beginning seriously to age. They had been undergraduates together at Stanford. One day Jack, who was not only big but had a reputation as a very strong athlete, had given Miniver a hard time about his name and his weight, which even at that time was impressive. When Jack had gone too far, Miniver laid him out flat on his back with two or three expert punches. Everyone was astonished – Jack most of all – and ever since then they had been close friends.

They had plotted literary futures together, then turned to business without much regret and in fact little change of attitude – Jack as a lifelong executive at IBI, Miniver as a lifelong dilettante who had finally started his own business.

The two were as different as they were similar. Both had made bad marriages, but Jack, who could not stand his wife any more than anyone else could, had stayed faithfully by her, or at least had stayed by her. Miniver, on the other hand, thought each of his wives a pure delight, and had divorced four times.

Each man could drink a gorilla under the table, but Miniver ate more in a day than Jack did in a weekend. Both fused business with books. Each was an international bastard – American mothers, Jack with an English, Miniver with a French father –

and this brought them together even more over the years as they came to realize how foreign they were. They belonged fully nowhere.

Jack, however, had spent most of his life in America. To Miniver he seemed the essence of that country, which Miniver loved and would not have known how to live in. Jack was a quintessential American, but he too was an American who did not quite fit in America. He spoke a kind of American dialect, but he read good books.

The two were among the world's few modern Western businessmen – if indeed they were modern businessmen – to have so many children: seven, as we have seen, for Miniver, and six for Jack. Each man, instead of feeling apologetic about polluting an overpopulated world, was a little vain about all that progeny. Miniver kept most of his in a little country paradise well outside Paris, where he saw them less often than he would have liked but stayed close to them, and Jack lived with his in a big Long Island house dominated by his dragon-wife, and found every business reason he could to get away. Both men thought children should grow up in the country. In spite of their absences, each had the reputation of a good and devoted father.

Jack was becoming richer every year. Miniver's specialty was rather more spending than earning. He was in fact a *faux riche* who knew perfectly what to do with what he never had enough of. Even his Mercedes was old.

Physically they had nothing in common. Jack was over six feet tall and weighed a hundred and sixty pounds. Every part of him – face, arms, hands – seemed made of sculpted muscle and bone. Miniver, massive as he was, was shorter and weighed well nigh twice as much. Together, they looked like a Continental version of Laurel and Hardy, who dressed well and drank rare wines. Both affected elegant English-style clothes, old leather and tweeds – one vertically, the other horizontally.

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As soon as they sat down at the Maxim's at Roissy airport – Jack was enough of a foreigner to call it Charles de Gaulle – Miniver began to hate it. For a start, he had thought they were going to the Maxim's in the rue Royale, the real Maxim's, not this poor suburban cousin. And then, the tables were too close together and the chairs were too narrow. He thought perhaps he should ask for two.

The waiter was arrogant, and Miniver hated arrogance wherever he found it, with the occasional exception of himself. But that would be a fleeting problem; Miniver would soon crush him into place. What he was hating most had not happened yet: he had heard that this airport Maxim's had also declined, like the original Maxim's, and he was afraid he was not going to have a good lunch. The very thought was enough to distract him even from the pleasure of being with Jack.

Jack looked at him with a boy's smile. "It's been almost three years. It sure is great to see you again. I'm under pressure to find some answers on this Chester du Maine thing, but I feel like just forgetting about it for the moment."

Jack was one of his best friends, but Miniver hardly looked up. He was distracted and he was brooding. "Let's talk about our lunch first. It's going to be difficult to get out of here alive."

Two hours later, the last crumbs were cleared away and the 1963 armagnac was served. Old times and friends had been talked and laughed about, and Miniver was happy. With his natural gift for such things, he had found his way out of the labyrinth. Start with *foie gras*, because it's a good bet: restaurants often have good *foie gras* because it's hard to ruin, keeps well and has high markup. Hit the wine list for the best there is, especially when IBI is paying: a restaurant like Maxim's, even the one at Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle and in decline, can't afford not to have a fine wine cellar, or at least a fine wine list. Château d'yquem with the *foie gras*, nothing less, and 1961, nothing less. Hard to find. Makes up for yesterday's tepid punk.

Then, when in culinary danger, go for beef, just as in America. The French know how to prepare it, especially with a little advice from Miniver: crisp outside, blood red inside. With a château margaux 1955 – two bottles, because they too are hard to find: seize the chance the gods have offered.

The cheese platter was as big around as the tire of Miniver's Mercedes and the roquefort was creamy and strong – a good opportunity to finish the sauternes. Take it easy on the desserts, Miniver doesn't want to be even fatter – just some early spring wild strawberries, not good but not bad.

They moved into the bar. First-rate espresso, excellent armagnac, especially by the third snifter. The heads of the two men were still as clear as old lead crystal, although in truth it must be said that old lead crystal is not always perfectly clear. All in all, Maxim's had turned out pretty well. And the waiter had dropped miserably into place at the first refusal of a too-cold yquem.

Jack had eaten, as usual, in enthusiastic moderate quantities, but no food had been taken away on the plates. Now he put down his third snifter – he could match Miniver in all forms of worthy liquids – and changed the subject.

"First I better tell you everything I know about Chester du Maine. It's not like IBI's giving you a cold call. Lot of the homework's already done."

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"Chester du Maine was an international mongrel like us – French father, English mother. His father started the business and made plenty of money." Stanford University had done wonders for Jack Longman's education, but nothing at all for his pronunciation, no doubt because Stanford professors spoke the same way. His English was a bit like Josianne's French. He pronounced the last three words "plenny a money."

"The du Maines were *nouveaux riches*, trying to climb into the upper bourgeoisie – or into the aristocracy, or back into the aristocracy from what I've heard, and apparently they weren't having a whole lotta success. Actually Chester never spent much time in England and probably never wanted to: they have offices here, in the 17th *arrondissement*, as well as in London. He liked things better here. The English would never have taken him for a lord. The French did, and he loved it."

Miniver smiled. "I know some Frenchmen who go to America for the same reason."

"Chester was beautifully set up for the business he inherited: he spent most of his life in debt, in other people's *châteaux* and on other people's horses – and it wasn't only his hosts' stairs and horses he mounted, as the French say."

Miniver smiled again, this time at Jack's surprising knowledge of the Gallic toast.

"I guess he was pretty much a good-for-nothing. All he seems to have cared about was luxury and laughs, and all his luxury was sensual. He knew as little about literature and history as the Beatles did."

Miniver thought of Josianne. Here was a difference between Jack and her: in spite of the way he spoke, Jack Longman was at ease with art and the history of ideas; in spite of his slang, he was an articulate and educated man. Josianne was as ignorant as she was intelligent.

"I'm surprised he did so well in business. He was pretty stupid, and very lazy. About eight years ago he married a strange lady, Hungarian I think, some sort of baroness. I've heard a lot about her but of course I've never met her. That's one of the things I'd like you to help me with. Her name's Helena."

Miniver was staring at the amber "legs" on the inside of his glass, debating whether this particular armagnac should be warmed in the hands like cognac. He decided not, swirled it, brought it to his nose, inhaled very deeply and nearly set his sinuses on fire.

Miniver was listening to, and would remember, every word. He would have done so even if there had been no money in this *affaire*, would have done nearly anything for

Jack. But he knew that there was enough IBI money here to restore the entire roof of his *maison de campagne*, and that thought pushed him to ever greater effort.

He looked up, coughed a little to recover from the armagnac fumes, and took a cigar from a small black leather case. A little perspiration glistened on his ample brow. "Give me her address. Is there any reason not to tell her I'm working with IBI?"

"I spose not. But you need to know more. Last few years, things have been going badly for Best Chester. The English were happy enough to buy his canned French truffles and exquisite wines, but he invested a lot in selling English food over here. The French don't appear to be keen on scotch eggs and beans on toast. He managed to cover up the difficulties, and most people apparently still haven't caught on, but I suspect that now he's dead the whole company'll collapse."

Jack motioned to the waiter and told him it would be simpler just to leave the bottle on the table. The waiter, already well cowed, hid his surprise. "And there's more. His marriage with Helena seems to have been falling apart faster than the business. I don't think his infidelity was the cause – in any case that wasn't anything new. I don't know what happened. They'd been more or less separated for a few months, I think, and people say Helena took it pretty hard. That's at least what people say. He was only forty-three but burned out – drugs, scotch. I'll give you the list of the company people we've already spoken to. Good Lord, Miniver, can't you move that foul cigar away? How can you ruin an old armagnac with those filthy fumes?"

Miniver moved his cigar, poured them each a handsome dose and thought of innocence. "I don't live in America. People aren't arrested here yet for smoking. I hope you haven't talked to too many people. Just how did Chester die?"

"That's why I'm here; we don't really know. There was an autopsy, and for the moment the verdict is cardiac arrest. Given his physical condition, maybe that's all there is to it. It *was*, certainly, cardiac arrest, but it isn't clear that it was an ordinary heart attack. We were able to obtain a copy of the first coroner's report and even managed to get our own pathologist in. Both men agree. The heart stopped, but there are almost no traces of the enzymes found in a classic heart attack. There are two hundred million French francs at stake. So we need to know what happened."

Miniver, disappointed in it, tossed his half-smoked cigar into a huge, pretentious crystal ashtray.

"Good God, Miniver! At least you could snuff it out."

"A gentleman," replied Miniver, "never snuffs out his cigar. Be patient, Jack. A cigar is like passion. If you let it run its course, it goes out all by itself. What difference does it make to IBI if he was murdered? You'll have to pay anyway."

"Not if it was his wife who murdered him. She's the only beneficiary. Chester never had any children. And not if it was suicide."

Miniver tried another cigar. "It's not really my field." Since Miniver's field was knowing lots of ropes and getting involved in things nobody else got involved in, this was disingenuous; perhaps, even with his friend, he was creating the conditions of a juicy fee.

Miniver's *entreprise* had no specific designation. It certainly was not a private detective agency, and it was not exactly an investigative agency either. But French, American and English companies often called upon Miniver Lafritte for "grey" information – neither official nor unofficial, neither black nor white.

"There's a lot we can't know," Jack continued, "because there's been no police investigation. Not yet, anyway. English businessmen in France are your field. And you know everybody. And IBI would just as soon keep this out of the regular channels. You know you'll love the work, and I know you're gonna accept. And it'll be more fun to work with you."

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Two days later Miniver Lafritte's entire top management team, which was also his entire team, was present at ten twenty-two sharp for a ten o'clock meeting on the new IBI *affaire*.

From Miniver's point of view, ten o'clock in the morning was early indeed – it must be said that he often worked into the night – and the fact of his matinal presence suggested the urgency of the whole business. Madame Lacrone had just shuffled quickly in with coffee, strong and black, the way Miniver liked it. Josianne was literally bouncing back in with, at Miniver's insistence, a clean ashtray. She probably slept, he thought, with an overflowing ashtray next to her bed.

Before the ladies could hear, Miniver was hastily giving the punch line of an improper joke to faithful Gérard.

"'Water's cold,' said the first Texan. 'Yeah,' said the second. 'Deep too.'" Gérard shrieked with laughter. Miniver felt good. The phone rang and Josianne bubbled out.

Miniver thought that in his whole life he had rarely met a capable man named Gérard, but that certainly his own Gérard was the worst on record. He had only three known qualities. First, he was shorter than Miniver, and almost as fat, and this made Miniver feel good – Gérard often made Miniver feel good. Second, he was perfectly faithful, and we have already seen that, in his way, Miniver was partial to fidelity. Third, he was constantly good-natured. The fact that Gérard felt great admiration for Miniver was a kind of unofficial bonus point.

Moved by gentle malice, Miniver started with his hapless deputy. "The purpose of this meeting is to present everything you've been able to discover about Chester du Maine. Gérard?"

"No *problème*, chief." The only one of the team who spoke good English was Josianne. Mme. Lacrone read English well but did not speak it much. Gérard loved to think that he could converse a little in the big boss's mother tongue. The result was a triumphant bastard garble which sounded like a badly translated cowboy film. Gérard's favorite expression was "no *problème*," although he had never done anything in his life with no *problème*. The phone rang again.

"I've got two hot tips, chief. One on his first wife, one on his second. Only thing is, as far as I can tell, he isn't dead."

Miniver squinted with 260 pounds of well-aged suspicion. "What's the name of the person you've been investigating, Gérard?"

"Ah, hold on, lemme check." Gérard pulled out a tattered pink cardboard file and spilled its contents all over the floor.

"A kind of male Josianne," thought Miniver, "with the brains removed." A delivery man came to the front office with an express document, and Mme. Lacrone went off to see him.

"Ah, here it is," said Gérard. "No *problème*. C. du Maine."

"What does the C. stand for, Gérard?"

Gérard looked nervous. "Dunno, boss. Chester, I guess."

"You guess. How many du Maines are there in France, Gérard? Even C. du Maines?" The phone rang again.

Perspiration was starting to run down Gérard's plump forehead. Perspiration came to Gérard's plump forehead at the onset of any emotion, his ordinary ones being limited to sitting down to a good meal or a glass of something interesting, smoking

someone else's cigars, starting enthusiastically off on a new project, and feeling guilty afterward. This was the afterward.

"How many du Maines, Gérard?"

"Dunno, chief. Lots, I guess."

Miniver gave in and lit his first cigar of the day. "Perhaps more than one, Gérard. Looks like yours isn't ours. Tell you what, Gérard. You can't answer the phone because you lose us clients. You can't do filing because you lose the file. But the new brass doorknob for the front door has been waiting for a courageous worker for weeks. Think you could do that?"

"No *problème*, chief." Gérard was relieved to be let off so lightly. Ever since the company car – the only car – had been impounded for his hundred and eighty-seventh unpaid parking ticket, Gérard had been yelled at every day. It hurt his feelings, and it hurt his pride. "No sooner said than done." As he stood up to go he knocked over Josianne's ashtray.

Gérard nevertheless knew that he was somehow installed in Miniver's heart – for better and, usually, for worse, but installed. He quickly poured himself a last half-cup of Mme. Lacrone's good strong coffee, grabbed half a dozen little Brittany buttercakes, hesitated for a moment, wondering if he dared, and decided he did. He smiled his best smile, and it was perfectly sincere.

"*Chef*," he said, "could I borrow a cigar?"

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The door closed behind Gérard. Aside from a little cackling, Mme. Lacrone being contagious, the two women had remained as impassive as always during the troubles with their colleague. They were used to them: each day with Gérard was the same. In addition, Mme. Lacrone had lived all her life minding her own business and was not about to change now because of good old good-for-nothing Gérard.

Josianne, on the other hand, though she did not hold it against him, did not think it fair to keep someone like that on the payroll, even at something under the legal minimum wage, and she had learned mostly to ignore Gérard's existence. Nonetheless, and in spite of herself, he often made her laugh.

Gérard thought everyone was wonderful.

It was Mme. Lacrone's turn to make her presentation. "Josianne has everything you should need, m'sieur, on Mrs. du Maine. What I have here concerns one of Mr. du

Maine's colleagues and a union representative." She held forth two fat, impeccable folders, one dark grey and the other light grey.

The first line rang, then the other line rang, and both women ran out, Josianne reaching the door first but then rushing back for her cigarettes. Miniver noticed that each of her stockings had a run. He stared for a while at the Rembrandt etching of the Sermon on the Mount opposite his desk, and had a good idea.

"Let's finish this discussion," he said when they had returned, "at La Belle Crasse." Miniver often had good ideas like this, and no one ever opposed them. So a table was reserved and, after a few minutes' delay because no one could open the door, they were comfortably installed in a private room of the *restaurant du quartier*.

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"Private room" is a pretentious a term for the little space in which Miniver and his team found themselves. "Back room" might be architecturally more accurate; it did at least have a door. "Private room" also tends to connote a luxurious restaurant, and this was not the case with La Belle Crasse.

As we have seen, Miniver Lafritte was a fake rich man. He was not often in debt but he was often near it: his company had little regular income and depended on the occasional, unpredicatable juicy contract. That is why his Mercedes, which was elegant, was in fact almost as old as his Harris tweeds and his fine English shoes, why he sometimes smoked cheap cigars, and why they were all in La Belle Crasse.

Not that La Belle Crasse was a *lieu de torture:* it was as clean as it needed to be, and the food was cheap and tasty – beef stews, calf's head, tartar steak, tripe and Miniver's beloved *steak-frites* with béarnaise sauce. Henri, the owner, never let his famously hot temper flare up at them, and Henri's wife was pretty.

Miniver nonetheless wished they would not bring him his *vin ordinaire* in a cracked imitation-14th-century pitcher. He poured glasses all around for everyone, knowing that Mme. Lacrone would make her one glass do for the whole meal, Josianne would drink only a few glasses, and he and Gérard would need several refills – not, of course, of their glasses, but of the pitchers. At last Mme. Lacrone could continue.

She picked a speck off her woolen vest. "For the moment, m'sieur, I have tried to limit my *recherches* to suspect persons – people who were in conflict with Mr. du Maine. And I've found two. William Sargent is the Director of the English end of Best Chester. I haven't yet found anyone who knows why, but my sister-in-law says that her friend says that everybody knew Mr. du Maine and Mr. Sargent didn't get

along. Mr. Sargent is older than his boss – or than his boss was." Mme. Lacrone always spoke with care and correction.

"Mr. Sargent seems to be an energetic and rather emotional man. His relationships appear to be tempestuous with a good many of his colleagues, not just with Mr. du Maine. But his energy and intelligence are such that people can't do without him. He swears like a trooper and flirts constantly with the ladies, but he's apparently loyal, and he's been married to the same woman for more than thirty years."

"He doesn't sound so bad to me," said Miniver, thumbing through the file before slipping it into his fine-grained, black leather briefcase.

Mme. Lacrone held forth the dark grey folder. "Jean Lefevre works at the Best Chester warehouse in Le Blanc-Mesnil. He's been the union delegate there – a member of the CGT, though he's not a member of the Party – for sixteen years. In the last few months there have been rumors of lay-offs at the warehouse – business has been down – and so there's been the usual union-management conflict. But very severe, it seems."

Miniver made a mental note to go to see him soon. "Josianne?"

Josianne twisted in her chair in order to reach a bright yellow file. Her tight short skirt was half unzipped, letting out bits of blouse, pantyhose and God Knows What. "My ex-husband's cousin told me plenny. About Chester *and* his wife – though she only met his wife once, and she wishes she hadn't met her at all.

"Chester wasn't such a bad guy. He was a lotta laughs. He liked everybody, liked to go out and drink and have a good time. Only, remember what I said before about him not being a snob? Well, that's sorta not true. I dunno. He always kept his family and his house and his married life sorta secret. Sometimes he'd get angry if anybody talked about them or asked questions about them." With perfect unconsciousness, Josianne blew cigarette smoke directly into Gérard's face. Gérard was perfectly unconscious of it too.

"His wife's a mystery to me. Some kind of aristocrat I think – *une baronne?* Hungarian, but she speaks French as good as me and English like you do, no accent at all. What I know for sure is that for a long time now she's been the power behind the company – I mean, if the company's a success, or at least if it hasn't gone out of business, it's because of her, not him. I heard stories of her working all night and weekends. I heard she's the real boss, she makes all the important decisions. Chester just spent the money. And I have the impression she kinda thinks the company's her baby.

"I don't have any reason to think she's … well, that she'd do anything bad, but she'd sure have motives. They'd been separated for some time – hadn't lived together for, I dunno, maybe six months. At least, maybe his official address was still there but he wasn't.

"He never was faithful and maybe she's the jealous type. If he was running the company down, spending so much money and all, well … far as I can tell, she'll inherit the company now and be the official boss. Anyway, she seems real smart and sorta … dangerous."

As soon as Josianne had finished, Gérard, who had been watching her intently, asked her if he could borrow a cigarette.

*

Jack was off in Sologne for two days of hunting on a private reserve – no need for the hunting season that way, or even a hunting license. He had left with his usual boyish smile, happy to be in France, happy not to be in Long Island with his wife, happy to leave everything to Miniver and borrow his custom-made 12-gauge side-by-side Holland and Holland shotgun with the walnut stock. He would have taken Miniver's custom-made hunting clothes too, but that was not possible.

This left Miniver free to begin his work, and the first part of it seemed to include going to meet the widow. He took a taxi to northeast Paris – he did not have much choice now that the car was impounded, but cars were never practical in Paris, and this way he could forget about the *alcootest.*

Helena du Maine lived, alone now, alone apparently these months, in a surprisingly unpretentious neighborhood, though the tree-lined square was calm and residential, and the apartment itself was large and fine: oak *parquet* floors, massive doors and windows, beautifully molded high plaster ceilings. Boys played *foot* in the half-abandoned street. It was the kind of neighborhood more often found in American cities than in France: luxury gone popular.

Miniver wondered about it. This was the 20th *arrondissement*, which was only beginning to be fashionable. Why would a man with social ambitions live in this *quartier*? Of course, it was better to receive in an unfashionable neighborhood, but in a beautiful apartment on a lovely square, than the reverse. Once you were inside, you forgot about the address and thought only of the antique furniture and the old silver. You did not even notice that there were no books. And there was a servant – a strange, silent, servile servant who apparently spoke only Hungarian.

Madame du Maine served tea from a squat silver teapot that looked to him like an eighteenth-century family heritage, but then what did he know about Hungarian silver? She was a dark-haired, alert woman with extremely lively grey eyes and an intelligent face. Although she was short she did not seem short. Miniver could not decide whether she was plump or not, and he could not quickly decide whether she was pretty or not, but she was certainly attractive.

He had no interest in her tea but she had offered nothing else. Immediately, he felt at ease and that he liked her – he saw steely penetration in the grey eyes, but what he felt was charm. He had not expected it.

As he almost always did in his work, he had announced the nature of his visit candidly: he was gathering information for IBI concerning the death of her husband. Mme. du Maine had seen nothing to object to and had received him promptly and with apparent *amabilité.*

All the tables in the apartment, large and small, round and rectangular, were covered with extraordinary, rich and apparently very old brocade. Later he would learn that, underneath the brocade, there were no tables, but only trestles supporting ordinary boards: Helena du Maine was a fake rich person like him, although what little money she had was old.

Files, bills, a portable computer, checkbooks, two calculators and other office paraphernalia were on these tables. In a corner was a combination *photocopieuse-imprimante.* Evidently what Josianne had said about her hard work was true.

But at the moment there was no question of hard work. Helena du Maine passed Miniver a translucent blue china cup of tea and asked him – in perfect, distinguished English, with no accent and no mistakes whatsoever, but with unnaturally good elocution – how she could be helpful.

"Forgive this intrusion. It's an unhappy thing to have to fill out forms in the midst of mourning. But I believe you know that a … ah … large life insurance policy – with you as the sole beneficiary – was issued some time ago in your late husband's name. And of course it's a matter of routine – there is certainly no reason to suspect anything irregular (and it was only here that Miniver prevaricated) – of course it's inevitable routine to ask certain questions."

"Of course." Her eyes were grey and keen and gave nothing at all away. Miniver was trying to read her, and failing. Was she angry? Offended? Amused?

"First of all, may I ask – if only to eliminate the question – is there any possibility – even the remotest possibility … of suicide?"

Something like humor came into her eyes. "Suicide would not be an unhappy verdict for IBI. Please do not protest – IBI is doing its job, and you are working for IBI. In their and in your place, I would be asking the same questions."

Miniver was beginning to decide she was not in fact pretty, but perhaps beautiful in so subtle a way that one did not see it at first, and that many people would perhaps never recognize as beautiful. In any case this was a remarkable woman. Why had she married Chester du Maine? Or was that a silly question?

"I am afraid," she continued, "that my husband was a very poor candidate for suicide. He loved life, and he did not take it seriously. No one, I think, who combines those two qualities will commit suicide."

Miniver thought about this. "Not a depressive suicide, in any case. He had no health problems, no … other grave problems?"

"No grave ones. If you wish I will make his medical records available to you." Although she was small, she gave an impression of slender elegance. Her hands, long for someone her size, bore only a wedding band and a cabochon pigeon's-blood ruby set in a red gold ring. A Frenchwoman of her *milieu* would have worn more rings.

"You have those records right up to his death?"

For the first time, but not the last, her eyes flashed a little. "In spite of what you may have heard, monsieur, my husband and I were not estranged. His residence was here until he died. As you know, he did not die here, however. He died, alone, in the country house we have used together for eight years."

"Excuse me. Would it be possible for me … to have your permission … to visit that house?"

Visibly, she hesitated, then in an instant gave her answer. "Of course you have no right to visit the house. You are not the police, not any sort of official." She paused, as if to let Miniver savor her words. "But I do not distrust you, and I have nothing to hide. I will give you the keys if you like."

"Thank you. Forgive these formalities. I count on you, then, for the keys and the medical records – and the business records too?"
The eyes flashed again, this time with no mistaking. "They are a matter of public record."

"Not all of them. And not this year's records. Not yet."

The eyes continued to flash. "You have perhaps heard of certain difficulties at Best Chester. I assure you they are both transient and exaggerated. Best Chester is a healthy company with a strong future. It will exist and flourish for a long time to come, as my husband would have wished."

He had the impression he was listening to Mme. du Maine's own wish, and not her husband's.

"The company will be here long after me." She rose, with grace, and so put an end to the interview. Miniver thanked his hostess and left.

Walking down the carpeted oak steps of the old apartment building, he was still too struck by Helena du Maine to know what he thought. He smiled at the recollection of Josianne's comment: "She speaks French as good as me." Miniver knew few people who spoke French as well as Helena du Maine, and certainly not Josianne. But it was one of Mme. du Maine's English sentences that stayed in his mind: she had said she did not distrust him. She had not said she trusted him.

*

The next day was reserved for the Paris suburbs and the antagonistic union leader Jean Lefevre. Miniver knew some of what was in store for him, because he knew something of unions, and more than he wanted to know of Le Blanc-Mesnil.

There are two kinds of Paris suburbs: Versailles, Auteuil and St-Germain-en-Laye, lovely rich places full of aristocrats and comfortable *bourgeois*, of remarkable old buildings and antique furniture, and there is the other kind. Le Blanc-Mesnil is the other kind.

The taxi moved cautiously through littered streets, past little shopping centers with smashed or boarded-up windows, abandoned cars, trash, broken glass – hypodermic needles if you looked closely – and people you really, really didn't want to meet.

This sort of slum was nearly universal: it could have been in America, Germany or Asia, except for the language on the signs. Miniver thought of it as part of the Plastic Monoculture: towers of tenement housing, the essence of What Was Wrong. It all seemed even more incongruous than it otherwise would have because of the still fresh memory of the elegant woman in her delightful Paris apartment.

Here there was nothing elegant, and everything squalid. Almost enough, thought Miniver, to make you a union man, and easily enough to make you as unhappy with your century as Miniver was. The taxi drove up, over broken asphalt, to the corrugated hulk of the company warehouse.

Jean Lefevre was waiting for him in the room reserved for the *délégué du personnel* – the local labor representative who sometimes has more influence than the boss. Nobody took a *délégué du personnel* lightly. The hours reserved for his meetings and his work with fellow union members, or with management, were always scrupulously respected. A clever union man was one of the powers that be.

Lefevre was dressed in a French worker's traditional blue coveralls. His fingernails were dirty and stained with tobacco. He was badly shaven. His eyes were quick and intelligent, and maybe humorous. Beside him were several surplus cans of Best Chester Real English Beans on Toast. Miniver wondered whether the toast was in there too. Lefevre shook Miniver's hand but remained distant.

Miniver thanked him for receiving him and asked many of the same questions he had put the day before to Helena du Maine. The answers were not the same.

"Chester du Maine was an irresponsible *salaud.* He hardly worked here and it's a pity he did at all – if he'd never seen this place, it might be in better shape today." Lefevre's French was vigorous, *populaire* and grammatically correct. He lit a *Gauloise blonde filtre* – the modern French working man's cigarette – with a disposable plastic lighter, not offering a cigarette to Miniver.

"It's true then that the company's in trouble?"

"There are some forty people working in this warehouse alone – in my warehouse, in the warehouse I represent. If we're lucky maybe only half will lose their jobs."

Miniver began to be aware that this man of the people used no bourgeois deodorant. "Mme. du Maine speaks of managing the company, now that her husband is gone."

"Mme. du Maine began managing the company long ago. If she hadn't, maybe nobody at all would be left. She's hard as a diamond and works for herself alone – I don't think she ever cared about her husband – but she knows what she's doing. If Chester du Maine had had the kindness to die a long time ago, instead of lingering to spend as much money as he did, well, the company would be sitting pretty."

Miniver was conscious of the lucidity to dine through.

"Is it true you fought with M. du Maine?"

"Often and hard. I suppose you could say we were enemies."

"There's a story that you once said he should watch out or he could end up like certain assassinated businessmen. Is that true? Did you say that?"

"I did."

"And did you mean it?"

Jean Lefevre smiled. "Chester du Maine died of a heart attack."

*

Helena du Maine's Hungarian servant, a silent, stooped, deferential old man, brought the promised keys for the *maison de campagne*. Miniver felt ill at ease with them, but not so much that he was prepared to renounce his visit.

He had to look up Noère on a map: it was somewhere in the lost regions of Seine-et-Marne and took time to find. He would have to rent a car. Since it was on IBI, he thought he might as well rent a nice one.

It should be said here that Miniver Lafritte was honesty itself. He had never cheated a client, much less an employee. He had never even cheated on his wives; he just changed them. His idea of the IBI expense account was simply compensation for work honestly contracted and done as well as he could do it. But he saw no reason to skimp.

His temporary Corvette approached the village. The outskirts of this piece of darkest France were mostly sugarbeet fields-to-be, but also present or future fodder corn and peas, wheat and rye and – Miniver's favorite – brilliant borders of poppies.

He knew that arriving in Noère in a red Corvette – the only one in Paris, and probably the only one in France – was not a good way to pass unnoticed. He had hesitated at first, especially because he was not sure he would fit inside. But he had not hesitated very long, and he fit.

The pouring rain would help: no one would be out in the streets. In any case, why did he need to be discreet? The rain made the old red roofs glisten, though not as much as the Corvette, and it made the leaves in the fields shine as it pounded them down. He carefully passed a fat, middle-aged man bumbling steadily along on a small motorbike. There were still many such men in France. There, thought he, but for good luck, go I (he saw no reason to thank God in this particular case). He went around a wooded curve and there it was: Noère. Population 800. He was going to be noticed and discussed by eight hundred denizens.

And why not? There was, he said to himself again, nothing secret about the visit, nothing secret about anything he was doing, apart from a few suspicions. He had to

drive back and forth in the village several times before he found the house. That would have been enough to start the first two hundred.

The house was big and old, made of cut stone, turning its back to the street like so many houses in Europe, keeping its garden secret. It was built on the banks of the river – in fact part of it included the old village mill. The sound of the nearby rushing water was delightful, in counterpoint to the sound of the rain, but Miniver was glad his own country house was not a former mill: the humidity spreads everywhere, he thought, and in time the sound of the water becomes monotonous, drowning out the songs of the birds and the changing wind in the trees.

He climbed the three worn stone steps to the front door. There was something impressive here, as was fitting for a dead man's house. He struggled with the keys for a moment, and had to push the swollen door hard to open it. Immediately, there was the smell of must. That was the river, and a house that had been closed for a week or two now.

No electricity. Who had thought to cut it off so promptly? Helena, no doubt; she had a reputation for avarice – or, at least, frugality. That was, thought Miniver – and it might be important – the act of someone who knew what it was to need money and not to have it. And the act of someone who had apparently no intention of coming here again soon.

He began opening the windows and the shutters, and the light grew throughout the rooms. He looked around him and thought of Sophie Tucker's dictum, "I've been rich and I've been poor – rich is better."

This was the kind of place that inspired respect for money. The waxed white-and-black stone floor tiles gleamed liked the roofs in the rain. Everywhere in these big rooms were massive pieces of antique furniture – mostly Louis XIII, the wooden diamonds shining in the indirect light, in the translucence of their aged patina. There was old silver and porcelain, and once again, an absence of books. Chester du Maine may have died short of cash, but there had been money somewhere in his past.

Whose taste was this, Chester's or Helena's? Miniver wondered for a moment whether it mattered and decided it might. He knew the house had been in Chester's family for a long time. It was the previous Chester, the father, who had redone all the rooms. But the more recent Chester had the reputation of a pretentious boor, and a boor, even a rich boor, could not have created or even maintained anything like this. The décor, he decided, was Helena's doing. He turned over a huge pewter dish to study its hallmark: something strange he did not recognize. Arbitrarily, he decided it must be Hungarian.

This, he thought, is where Chester du Maine was found dead – the next morning, by the maid. A corpse on the beautifully aging leather of the Chesterfield sofa. Nothing in the house now suggested mystery. Nothing he had seen so far suggested anything unusual, except by its beauty. No doubt Chester had indeed died of an ordinary heart attack, enzymes or no enzymes. The police had never come. Nothing was displaced. On a polished eighteenth-century farm table near a kitchen window was a crystal vase full of dead flowers.

Wonderful times must sometimes have filled these rooms – the married couple, their friends, the man and his mistresses: love and good talk, friendship and good food. The house was certainly designed and furnished for all that. It reminded Miniver of why he chose to live in France. It made him want to be back in his own country house, with his children and his current wife. It even gave him the illusion of being close to Helena and Chester du Maine.

Footsteps echo when one walks through a strange house alone. Miniver wandered through all the rooms, upstairs, downstairs, listening to his own presence. He tried to visit the cellar, but found that he had not been given that particular key. He wondered whether the detail was significant and decided it was not. He felt sure, or almost sure, that the cellar held only wine.

Upstairs he found huge, ancient, gleaming wooden *armoires*, full of fine clothes, nothing but fine clothes – hunting clothes, country clothes, evening clothes and morning clothes. Why would there be evening and morning clothes in a country house? It was a long way to Paris, though less to some other grand places where they might have been invited. No gardening clothes: they must have had a gardener. Far more men's clothes than women's clothes. He decided that probably meant only that Chester spent more money than did his wife, and he already knew that.

He could not be sure, by looking at the sizes, that all the feminine clothes belonged to the same woman, but he found it hard to imagine they did not. He was ill at ease looking through their private things and was about to stop when he noticed, in the corner of one of the *armoires*, what looked like a white shirt stained with blood. He took it out and looked at it more closely. It was a fine percale cotton shirt, with brown bloodstains on the torn left sleeve. He put it back. It was not likely to be important. Chester du Maine had not bled to death.

On the wall in a sort of study were three firearms – two rifles and an extraordinary, hand-engraved shotgun. They were locked with some kind of security system and Miniver had no way of taking them down to inspect them, but he climbed onto a creaking chair to have a better look. There was a thin, even layer of dust on the upper part of each of the firearms. He found no ammunition anywhere.

The late spring rain was gone and the sun was out as he walked through the gardens. They were not large, but they were worthy of the house. The cherry trees were in blossom; there were no dead flowers, nothing overgrown, no weeds. Apparently the death of the master had changed nothing in the gardener's routine.

This house, this garden might have been a place of love and joy, or a place of betrayal and horror. Miniver sat down on an old stone seat which was already almost dry and took out a silver flask. He removed a cigar from a little black leather case and smoked it, as he liked to do when he was thinking seriously. He was beginning to know who these people were, but no more about what had happened, or had not.

*

It was hard to close the front door and harder to lock it. He had a sense of being watched, and of looking ridiculous, as he fumbled again with the key. But then, he thought, he had seen to that already, arriving in a red Corvette. It was a wonder no one had challenged him.

He eased back into his *belle américaine*, started the gigantic motor and drove away in the sun. Passing the bakery he noticed a very pretty, slender woman in her twenties, holding a retarded boy by the hand. The boy, in his mid-teens, fixed Miniver with what seemed a blind moon gaze. To Miniver, who had no experience with handicapped children, the boy's face looked like bare buttocks.

*

It was time, thought Miniver, to go to London and make the acquaintance of some of the people there. Jack was enjoying himself in Paris too much to go with him, but Miniver looked forward to London nonetheless: he had spent part of his childhood there. He reserved an apartment in Hampstead, in an old college he knew.

But by the time he left the airport he was almost sorry he had come. Heathrow must be, he thought, the worst airport in the world. He had lost so much time there that he was too late for a proper dinner, especially in London, and for Miniver this was a sinister start indeed.

Shown his rooms at the college, he opened a leather suitcase, battered almost beyond recognition by Heathrow and other airport personnel, hung up the clothes that needed hanging, including a suit he put in the steaming bathroom, and went out for a walk on the Heath.

That, after Heathrow, was mistake number two. Miniver was not meant for life on Hampstead Heath. Three times he was approached by gentlemen who expressed an

unhealthy interest in him. He quickly found himself back in his room, rereading Jane Austen – now *there* was a civilized society – and wondering if he dared smoke a cigar in his room, since he didn't dare smoke one out. He decided he did not.

He had no cognac, no comfortable old armchair, no cigar, and it was too late to go to London. He soon fell miserably asleep.

*

He woke in a grey drizzle but better spirits. Miniver was not a man to be discouraged by simple rain; he was after all in London. He remembered Sam Johnson's dictum. He had several appointments in the London offices of Best Chester, but he was free all morning – he had expected to get up late, as he usually did when he could; he had not expected to fall asleep so early that he would rise at eight. This time, he thought, a walk in London might be safer.

And so it was. He stopped in the National Gallery just long enough to look at the golds and lapis lazuli blues of the medieval masters. He was a specialist of very brief museum visits, but he stopped a long time in front of Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity*. The painting had always struck him with its harmonious riot of color, and also perhaps with a sort of attraction of opposites: it had as much *gracilité* as Miniver did not.

He wandered up Regent Street and ordered clothes, to be sent on to Paris. He went back to his old stomping grounds in Queensway – he wanted to take again one of the inexpensive lunches that had been a luxury to him when he was a student – and found that the only thing that had not changed there was his favorite old Indian restaurant. This time he did not ask them to make the curry as hot as possible. The rain stopped and he walked across Hyde Park. He listened to the traffic and looked for the old black taxis of his childhood. There were not many left. He walked and walked. He was a happy man.

*

The afternoon meetings lasted much longer than expected.

Miniver met Viola Leeds, who had filed a complaint with the union against Chester for sexual harassment. There had apparently been a number of stories concerning what in the old days would perhaps have been called "excessive enthusiasm for the ladies," but Mlle. Leeds was the only person to file a formal complaint.

She spoke with a certain vague animation, but appeared more concerned with her potentially lucrative victimization than with Chester du Maine himself. In fact, she hardly seemed to know him – but knowing one's aggressor was, thought Miniver,

unnecessary: rapists, like murderers, are not always properly introduced. What struck Miniver was not that he felt that Chester du Maine was incapable of that particular kind of brutality, but that Ms. Leeds' entire interest in the question seemed pecuniary. She insisted a good deal on her mental suffering: "I can't 'ardly sleep no more, and I gets all tense when a man comes close."

He met another union worker, someone who was obviously not fond of the Big Boss Chester, who said that Ms. Leeds appeared to get sexually harassed wherever she went. "About two years ago we was both in the back storeroom, and we sexually 'arassed each other for 'alf an hour."

Miniver heard of a few people who had perhaps been fired unjustly, and more who thought they had been, but he decided not to follow up on ordinary unjustly and justly fired persons. He checked their travel records nonetheless, as far as he could, around the time of Chester's death. It did not occur to him that the murderer, if such a person existed, could have been far from Chester at the moment of his death.

The most convincing interview he had was with a low-level executive who complained keenly about Chester du Maine in words that reminded Miniver of Jean Lefevre's: "If Mr. du Maine had not done what he did, and had done what he didn't, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in today. I make no formal complaint, but a lot of us here have been looking for work elsewhere." The great advantage of low-level managers, thought Miniver, is that they often speak their minds. The high-level people rarely do – in government, in the army or in business.

And then came William Sargent, the top London banana, who reported directly to Chester – or to Helena. Sargent was a more complex case. All afternoon, Miniver's meetings had taken place in a room next to Sargent's chrome-and-leather office – hideous, thought Miniver, but as impressive as it was meant to be: a kind of modern, business Versailles. Miniver had started the afternoon by meeting Sargent, seen him in action off and on for the rest of the afternoon, and was finishing the day in a private meeting with him.

William Sargent was a tornado of a man. He spoke with an accent that reminded Miniver of former Primer Minister John Major: correct, but not one of Us – or one of Them. Unlike Major, however, there was nothing gentle about him. Sargent overwhelmed, both with his exceptional energy and with a particular approach to people which Miniver had seen in action all afternoon: the man inspired admiration, loyalty and terror in everyone who worked for him, in roughly equal parts.

He did this in a specific way. First, he had undoubted authority – undoubted, for a start, by William Sargent. He was not a man of self-deprecation; his only experience of diffidence would have been other people's. He believed so completely in

whatever he thought or saw, in whatever analysis or project he found in his head, that almost no one questioned his rightness and superiority. This from someone whose education and intelligence were generally mediocre – a fact that probably explained the whole man.

Sargent dominated people with energy and enthusiasm for his work. He lived it, he loved it, he seemed to think of nothing else. That, or so his colleagues apparently thought, qualified him perfectly, and it tended to inspire comparable commitment and effort in others. Miniver was doubly impressed with this, since he had hardly the same attitude toward his own job: he liked his work but found it natural to limit it to weekday afternoons, plus the occasional evening and minus the occasional very long weekend with his family *à la campagne.* Moderation, it seemed to Miniver, was nowhere more important than in the workplace.

Sargent had another exceptional characteristic: he kept everyone off balance. Miniver recognized the type, and saw it in operation half a dozen times in that one afternoon: Sargent set people up and then knocked them down. One minute he flattered you, he admired you, he appreciated you, he made you glow – and he was sincere. But the next moment he deflated you with some dreadful but penetrating observation. If he could do this in ribald language, so much the better.

At the beginning of the afternoon, while Miniver was still in Sargent's office, his chief aide had come in with a report. Sargent introduced the man as one of his most brilliant colleagues, one of the pillars of Best Chester, and it was clear from his tone that he was not speaking ironically. The man blushed with pleasure and pride.

Within two minutes the tone had changed. With no concession to the presence of an outsider, Sargent said, "That report you wrote this morning's trash. I'd never've expected such crap from you. What's the matter, aren't you getting any?" The man blushed again, this time in humiliation and confusion.

It seemed that everyone who worked for William Sargent was kept off balance in this way. Miniver wondered that his people did not just walk out and slam the door, or suffer nervous breakdowns, but apparently they did not: Sargent's record was consistently excellent. Most of his employees were unusually loyal and unusually productive. The conflicts all appeared superficial and fleeting.

More remarkable still, people seemed genuinely to like him. In all his afternoon discussions he heard almost nothing negative about Sargent, and he heard a good deal of praise, respect and gratitude.

"And yet," thought Miniver, "they run around like chickens."

*

The meeting proper with Sargent did not begin until after six – not late for a French executive, but late for an English one. Sargent crashed into the meeting room and, to Miniver's great surprise and displeasure, slapped him heartily on the shoulder. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. I hope you've found whatever you're looking for?"

Miniver started to answer, but Sargent interrupted him.

"You've met a lot of interesting people. You've probably heard everything and its opposite."

Miniver started to speak, but Sargent interrupted him again.

"You're staying in a hotel. What are your plans for dinner?"

This time Miniver was allowed time to say he had none. Sargent then quickly determined that they would dine together. Miniver was hardly consulted, though in fact he had no better project, and was charmed and pleased, in spite of himself, by the invitation – the same charm, he thought, that he had seen in operation all afternoon long. In what seemed no time, listening to the vivid and genuinely interesting Sargent monologue, Miniver found himself stepping out of a cab and into the Royal. The charm was growing. This man was very good.

Given the place, the dinner was not. The Royal was one of the best-known restaurants in London, and often up to its reputation, but William Sargent did what he could to dine badly. What was lacking in gourmet excellence, however, he made up in showmanship.

The headwaiter greeted Sargent by name, and Sargent gave the headwaiter the same hearty, familiar greeting he seemed to reserve for everyone. Miniver nonetheless observed that the headwaiter, who was good at his job, knew how to perform for his clients, to give them what they wanted, which was always more than a good table and good food. The headwaiter was helping Sargent be impressive.

"What looks good to you on the menu? The scallops here are delicious."

Miniver started to say that scallops were among his favorite foods but Sargent was off again.

"The *salade riche* has everything in it – avocadoes and *foie gras* and lobster and I don't know what."

Miniver started to explain, in muted, courteous language, that he had a horror of *salades riche*s. He was looking for a phrase more tactful than "classy garbage for people who don't know how to dine," but he was not allowed the instant he needed to find it.

Sargent raced on, as if it were important to get this dining business over as soon as possible. "They have a turkey breast cooked in cider that I'm sure you'd love."

Miniver paled. He thought he would rather go hungry than eat a turkey breast. The very suggestion took his breath away. By the time he got it back Sargent had ordered *salades riches* and turkey breast for each of them.

"Now for the wine," said Sargent. "What would you like? What would you recommend? How about a nice beaujolais?"

"*O Sainte Mère*," thought Miniver, though by now he was past hope and caring. He made no more futile efforts to speak and the beaujolais was ordered. In its way the wine was the perfect companion to the rest.

Having small occasion to be distracted by his dinner, Miniver soon learned to guide Sargent's talk: it was sometimes possible to slip in one word or two, and that, he discovered, was often enough to set the man off in a new direction.

"Viola Leeds says she can't sleep?" Sargent guffawed. "The problem isn't that she's getting harassed – the problem's that she's not. If she were, she'd be sleeping like a baby."

Miniver had only to sit back, eat and drink what he could, listen and remember. By the end of a mercifully quick repast, Sargent had opined that Chester's death was a terrible thing, that Helena du Maine was not only a genuine lady but also an irreplaceable and extraordinary manager, that whatever differences had ever existed between him, Sargent, and his boss were creative and minor, that no, no, the company was not in any sort of serious trouble, and that yes, its future was bright.

Most of that was mundane small talk, the kind of thing Sargent, or any other high-level executive, would produce routinely. But Miniver was no amateur interrogator. What he most emphatically saw, more even than he had seen it in his office, was that William Sargent would do almost anything to protect the company he loved.

The two men had been together constantly since the decision to dine together had been made – by Sargent. During that time he had made no phone call, notified no one. It was therefore obvious that Sargent had no other plans for dinner. He had already intended to invite Miniver, or he had expected to dine alone. In either case,

this company, the company Chester du Maine had almost sunk, seemed primary in William Sargent's life.

After a good dessert, there was sudden nothing: no cognac, not even coffee – only an apparent need to flee. In fact Miniver felt sure that Sargent was in no hurry; he simply needed to rush whatever he did. He had no other speed.

"You know," said his host as they walked past gleaming brass doors held by not one but two doormen in ridiculous uniforms, "there's a party in Paris next Saturday – a kind of Best Chester party. It was scheduled earlier and then postponed because of Chester's death. We almost cancelled it and then decided not to, because there are so many fools looking for signs of the demise of the company. Just about everybody'll be there. You should come. You'll never have a better chance to get to know Best Chester and its people."

Miniver tried to accept the invitation, but Sargent kept talking. It soon became apparent that his presence had already been determined. A quick handshake, a promise to send a card, and William Sargent was gone like a thief in the night.

*

The evening was still young. Miniver walked, slowly and alone, up Regent Street, musing on the man. He wondered whether he should try to find a decent restaurant and have dinner. The West End was nearby but he disliked plays. If he went back to his rooms in Hampstead he would not be able to smoke.

He settled for the bar in a nearby hotel, its not-very-good best cognac and its very good best cigar, a montecristo torpedo. If a man could kill another just to save a company which was not even his own, William Sargent was that man.

But Miniver did not believe that such a thing was, in this case, possible. Sargent might conceivably approve violence – even murder? – in such an impassioned cause, but he would not, thought Miniver, do such a thing himself. That of course did not exclude the possibility that he was somehow involved. Rich people have servants.

It takes a long time to smoke a real cigar, and during that long time, alone in an anonymous hotel bar, Miniver thought and thought about William Sargent. Provisionally, he wrote him off his list.

*

Like all fashionable people, genuine grumps and old poops, Miniver hated parties, or said he did and thought he did. The Paris evening was almost summery, warm and long and lazy. Duty was calling, but it would of course be bad form to arrive early.

The *soirée* was at the Hotel Intercontinental, off the rue de Rivoli, but Miniver left his taxi at the top of the Champs-Elysées and decided to walk the rest of the way. For a fat man he walked a great deal, and besides it was all downhill.

He spent so much time looking at pretty women in their pre-summer clothes that he often bumped into people in the crowd. He wandered into the sidestreets of his beloved Paris and even found a church open, as churches never were any more, in preparation for a Saturday evening Mass. He entered and prayed.

He stopped at the terrace of Fouquet's, drank some straight *pastis*, no water, no ice. He was the only person in the world who did that: it reminded him of what the now-illegal *absinthe* must have been. He thanked God for the ladies passing in front of his terrace table, for warm days and for summer dresses. He was a perfectly happy Miniver, or would have been had he not had the *soirée* in front of him.

Nonetheless, this reception piqued his curiosity. He paid for his amber liquid, left his leather-upholstered observation post with a mixture of feelings and walked down past the U.S. Embassy and its Marine guards, into the place de la Concorde and up the rue de Rivoli.

He knew all the reception rooms of the Intercontinental, but he could never help being impressed. The glory and magnificence of the French Nineteenth Century shone out here: ceilings maybe twenty feet high, columns and pilasters, frescoes and huge oil paintings, a sea of ornament and even more gilt. The Hôtel Intercontinental looked like a kind of imperial brothel.

Before he had a chance to look around, the inevitable Sargent was upon him, shaking his hand furiously and too long, and calling him his friend. "You know a few of the people here already, I think. Let me introduce you to some more."

Although of course no introduction was necessary, it was natural that Sargent should lead Miniver first to the hostess, who was in effect Sargent's new boss, if she had not already been before. Madame du Maine was splendid in a long, dark grey gown, obviously *haute couture* from some years past, almost no *décolleté*. She was wearing a double row of large, off-white, slightly baroque pearls which flattered her grey eyes. Miniver wondered whether this was a post-modern form of mourning.

His hostess was of course too busy to afford much time to any one person, but she greeted him with a bright and apparently ingenuous smile. The woman was either sincere or a genius. It occurred to Miniver that she could be both.

"Mr. Lafritte. How nice to see you again. Welcome. Here you will have a chance to know a great many of the members of our little company. I believe you already know Mr. Sargent."

Sargent mumbled something awkward about their having wonderfully dined together in London. Miniver smiled to see him intimidated by the presence of the lady. He imagined that she was one of the only occasions of shaking his confidence in Sargent's entire turbocharged life.

Helena du Maine paid little attention to Sargent and began introducing Miniver to the guests surrounding her, of whom there were many. Miniver studied each of them and seemed not to. In spite of their friendly chatter, he felt there was a kind of crystal barrier between the brilliant woman in grey and himself. He saw Jack Longman across the room, excused himself and walked over to him.

Miniver had arranged the invitation; he thought Jack would enjoy the evening, but he also wanted his opinions on the people who would be there. "Have you found any interesting guests – or should I say candidates?"

"I wish you'd gotten here earlier. I don't know anyone, though that Sargent guy's been talking my ear off. Everyone here looks interesting to me but you're gonna have to guide me."

"You've met Mrs. du Maine."

"Yeah, thanks to Sargent. Remarkable woman. Something fascinating about her. I suppose you could say, something mysterious."

Miniver spotted Jean Lefevre.

As always when he could, Miniver took time to observe before approaching: Lefevre himself was watching someone else, as closely as Miniver was watching Lefevre, although at first, from the angle of his vision, he could not tell whom. Miniver moved a little to the side for a clearer view.

Jean Lefevre, standing alone with a drink in his hand, dwarfed beside a twelve-foot oil painting of the Battle of Solférino, seemed absorbed by Helena du Maine.

Jack's comments were precisely what Miniver wanted to hear, but they were suddenly drained of their attraction. Why was Lefevre watching her with such intensity? What was the nature of his interest? Animosity? Admiration? Allegiance? Infatuation? The lady seemed indeed to be the center of a great many rings of attention.

"Are you listening to a word I'm saying?"

Miniver apologized, took Jack by the elbow, crossed the long room and introduced Jean Lefevre. He looked less distinctive out of his worker's clothes. He wore a correct suit and tie, like the other guests. His hair and his hands were clean. He turned immediately, almost hastily, when Miniver and Jack approached.

They exchanged civilities. Lefevre looked vaguely amused – to meet Jack Longman, or perhaps it was to see Miniver again. He asked Miniver if he was making progress in his investigations.

"A little, Mr. Lefevre. A little. Perhaps with your help I could make more."

Lefevre's smile seemed a little sinister. "Don't forget, Mr. Lafritte, that you're talking to a union man. A CGT man. My job is not to facilitate your life. Some would say my job is to make it difficult – or impossible."

Everyone laughed, which was the intended effect. It was not clear whether he was joking or not.

*

An hour later Miniver took his leave. He had arranged with Jack to meet him later in the Latin Quarter for a drink, and what the French called jazz. The musical prospects were poor but, in spite of his command of the language, Jack was enough of a foreigner to think that Left Bank night life was exotic, interesting and French, and Miniver was too fond of his friend to contradict him.

Having said goodbye to both Mme. du Maine and William Sargent, he was descending the hotel's red-carpeted, wide marble steps when someone caught his eye: a young lady entering a taxi. He recognized her and was surprised.

Surely she had not been at the *soirée*? The room was so large, and the guests so numerous, that it was not impossible. In any case, Miniver was sure, or almost sure: it was the pretty woman he had seen in front of the bakery, holding the hand of a retarded boy, in Noère.

The flash of a long, shining electric pink skirt. The doorman closed the taxi door and the taxi disappeared.

*

Miniver laid his fat cigar in an ashtray and wondered whether he should light another, to smoke with the calvados he had just ordered. He fiddled with his shirt

cuffs: the plain gold cufflinks did not draw the cuffs tightly enough together and so they extended too far. This bothered him a lot.

He had not expected Jack Longman and Josianne Gougoux to become great pals, but in retrospect it was plausible: Jack was lonely and away from home and its consequences. Josianne was more than a little *vulgaire*, but she was bright, amusing and available. She certainly was not physically desirable, but then Miniver had no reason to think they were lovers. They spoke each other's languages and they were alone. It made sense for them to be friends.

In any case, they were certainly having a lively time. Everything they did on the IBI case they seemed to do together. They had rung Miniver's portable phone sometime between noon and three, which was pointless, since that was lunchtime. His phone had been off, of course, and now he called them back.

Amidst the shrieking, the laughter and the jokes, it was difficult for Miniver to get their facts straight. He felt vaguely jealous, since he himself never had so good a time with Josianne.

"Miniver," said Jack, "we got plenty of hot information here." Plenny.

Miniver could hear Josianne giggling. "*Arrête!*"

"Jo's ex-husband's whatever is a mine of information. She should get married more often." Peals of laughter.

"Turns out Chester du Maine had a mistress – his latest mistress – his last mistress, come to think of it – name of Claire Fleet. She works at BC out in Le Blanc-Mesnil – quality assurance, I think, some kind of technician."

As far as Miniver could tell from the noise, Jack had dropped the phone.

"Sorry 'bout that." More laughter. "Where'd you find this wonderful frog?" More laughter. Jack did not say "wonderful;" he said "wunnerful."

"Anyway, it seems that Helena du Maine never had a problem with Chester's other ladies, and there were plenty – at least nobody knows of any problems. He was more or less living with somebody, I think, before he met Helena, but since then there was nothing serious. Til now. Ouch!"

Miniver hesitated. "How sure are you of your sources?"

"Pretty sure. These people we talked to used to spend a lot of time with him. Chester wasn't a very private person. I don't think I've ever gathered information on anyone so easily – or had so much fun doing it."

Miniver fidgeted with his shirt cuffs. Jack continued. "Helena du Maine's another sacka potatoes. Nobody knows much about her at all, which makes this business so surprising. Stop it!" More laughter.

Miniver was beginning to reconsider his impressions of Josianne's and Jack's platonic friendship. "What are you talking about?"

"Mrs. du Maine confronted Miss Fleet and her husband in a restaurant, about six months ago I think. Made a scene. Or a scandal. Last thing the people who knew her – or didn't know her, maybe – expected of her. And the story gets worse – or better, depending on your point of view. Helena seemed obsessed with this young lady. She threatened to kill them both. In public – the threat, I mean. Don't know where she was planning to do the killing. This Miss Fleet must be an impressive young lady."

"She is, Jack. Thanks. Go back to your fun and information. I'll call you later." Miniver hung up.

*

Miniver found the same serenity and the same light in Helena du Maine's *salon:* he held the same pale blue cup of regrettable tea while he admired the poise of his hostess. She had agreed to meet him once more without hesitation, and had greeted him with something almost like friendliness. It was in fact her hallmark, he was beginning to believe, to keep a sort of magical balance between charm and a certain distance. Personally – Miniver was, after all, Franco-American – he found the combination pleasing.

Even his reference to the restaurant scandal did not faze her. She smiled, a little sadly. "I do get carried away sometimes. Not often. Do you think I killed my husband? I do not think you do."

And the difficulty was, Miniver did not.

The charm decreased, however, and the distance increased, when Miniver brought the conversation to money and the future of the company. "It is true. I would do … not just anything, but a great deal, to keep this company going. I have already saved it once, and I will save it again now." Helena du Maine said this with almost violent certitude. Miniver began, a little, to lose his conviction that she was incapable of

killing. Her grey eyes hardened and shone, not like flashing diamonds but like cold pearls.

*

It was past high time to meet Claire Fleet. Miniver wrote her a brief note, explaining who he was and asking her to meet him at a place of her choice. She answered in almost elegant handwriting, in almost excellent English, in blue ink on off-white paper, folded French-style into quarters.

He was happy with her choice of meeting-place, a Paris café he knew; he often preferred neutral meeting-places. He arrived almost half an hour early. His father had taught him, "If you want to be on time, be early."

Cafés had an advantage over restaurants: in the latter, having something to drink before your guest arrived was a sort of selfishness, and in France it was considered more or less incorrect. In a café, the waiter came to your table and you had no choice. While Miniver waited with his dry double *pastis* – as always, no ice, no water, making the waiter stare – an old *clochard* shuffled slowly in. His was an ordinary shuffle, not the speedy marvel of Mme. Lacrone.

The old man was what people called a bum when Miniver was a child. Now people said "*un SDF – sans domicile fixe*." Bum or homeless, he was *hors pair:* plastic bags on his feet and his hands, a pink shower cap on his head, a woman's long skirt over his trousers, like somebody who could not decide what and who he was. He could be smelled at some distance.

In a flash the waiter was at his side. The old man said he wanted to have lunch, though Miniver doubted his credit card was still valid. "Very good, sir," said the waiter. "Do you have your tickets?"

"What tickets?" said the poor old thing.

"The lunch tickets, of course. You can't have lunch here unless you have lunch tickets. You don't have yours? No problem. Just go to the Town Hall and ask." The waiter, very friendly, showed him the way to the Town Hall and the bum, bemused, walked slowly away.

Miniver was filled with admiration. Here was hope, he thought, even in the twentieth century. The waiter had done what he had to do, but done it gently, with grace, with kindness and respect. The old man had left without violence and without humiliation – probably without even knowing he had been sent away. And the Town Hall was just the place to send him.

A pretty woman spoke Miniver's name. It was, of course, the mystery girl, the young lady in front of the bakery, who had disappeared into a taxi outside the Hotel Intercontinental. Miniver had expected her. He rose and held a chair.

He had never before seen Claire Fleet without her coat. She wore loud clothes and cheap costume jewelry. The effect was so strong and so wild that it was the first thing one noticed about her.

Electric pink skirt – was it the same one? – bright pearl-colored blouse, short-cropped naturally blonde hair and giant shiny plastic ear-rings; lots of noisy bracelets but only one ring (probably a fake amethyst). Vivid red shoes. It was not every day, thought Miniver, that you were treated to a spectacle like that – and the effect was almost never what it was here.

Claire Fleet was not only a very pretty girl: she was – there was no denying it – beautifully dressed. It was the vindication, or the triumph, thought Miniver, of the working girl. Everything about her, and not at all least her way of dressing, seemed full of grace and attraction, almost of *distinction*: at least, until she opened her mouth. When she spoke, social prejudice once again reared its deformed head.

It was not, he thought later, that she spoke badly; her speech just took longer to appreciate than her clothes. Yet she spoke the way she dressed: an English working-class accent, a little West country, with slang and the odd grammatical mistake, though her speech was also alive and alert. Some of the grammatical peculiarities were typical of her class and region, and some were typical of a person whose native tongue was not quite English.

"Sorry to be light." She flashed a pretty smile which seemed spontaneous. The waiter appeared immediately, as a waiter would for such a girl. "Oil 'ave a *diabolo menthe*." She spoke in English to Miniver. Later he would discover that she spoke French as fluently as she spoke English, but neither language entirely as a native speaks it – and with a little less of the popular quality.

"I've seen you before," he said. "Once in Noère. You were standing in front of the bakery, holding a little boy's hand."

"Yeah, Oy remember. Oy live in Noère. 'At was me little brother – e's 'andicapped. You were droivin' a red sports car." (Here the already exhausted narrator abandons his attempt to reproduce Claire Fleet's accent, begging the reader to do his or her best with the few hints given above and below.)

The waiter arrived with a green drink that went perfectly with her clothes. In fluent, French, she asked him to bring her a pack of cigarettes, which the waiter seemed more than ready to do. Miniver would have been just as happy to do it himself.

Claire was easy to talk to and seemed without suspicion or reticence. She appeared a little naïve, and Miniver immediately felt avuncular. They talked some time before he brought up the subject of Chester du Maine.

"There was a scene once, in some restaurant. You and Chester and his wife."

"Ah, yeah. That was embarrasin'." Claire blushed. She was pretty when she blushed, he thought. And when she did not.

"Helena du Maine threatened to kill you both."

The blush turned white. Claire kept her eyes down and said nothing. Miniver felt brutal and was about to change the subject when she spoke.

"We weren't lovers, you know."

"I know nothing. I'm here to learn." He spoke with a tenderness he usually reserved for his own, and other, children.

"He was me boss. He asked me to go out. He was maybe … interested but" – she did not pronounce the final "t" of the word – "I wasn't. We were just friends."

"Did you see each other often?"

"Yeah, you could say that. But 'e was old enough to be me Dad."

Historically and statistically, thought Miniver, that counts for nothing. Yet he found himself wanting to believe the girl. He had no reason not to.

There was a rapid familiarity between them that could perhaps be explained by the fact that neither was fully French. They talked for a long time, sometimes about her friendship with Chester, sometimes about his death, sometimes about the company.

Claire had no apparent passion for it. "A company's a company, I suppose. They all look the same upside down." Her clunky plastic earrings flashed.

"Some good people, some bad, mixed together. I have other attachments." She spoke without pretension. That moment of their first meeting, thought Miniver later, was the only time she ever looked hard. But why should she be fond of this or any company?

She declined a second drink and smoked a single cigarette. When he was charming, she smiled; when he made jokes, she laughed, but only within reason and only if the jokes were funny – if not, she just smiled her pretty smile. When they separated, she shook his hand, as even English speakers do in France.

"May I see you again – if I need to, I mean?"

"If you like. You've got me number."

He felt that he would like to see her again even if he had no need to.

*

Back in his office, Miniver watched old Mme. Lacrone shuffle toward him. She moves, he thought – it was an affectionate thought – like an arthritic bear. There was a shy smile on her face.

"Josianne and Mr. Longman seem to be having a very good time together," said the old woman. She spoke without innuendo. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, but they had not returned from lunch – a peccadillo rather more tolerated in Miniver's offices than in most.

"I trust Mr. Longman's not keeping Josianne from her work."

"*Au contraire.* They're working together and finding more than I've found. But I have dug up a bit myself." With geometric accuracy, she set a stack of photocopies on Miniver's desk. Miniver could not tell whether the shy smile was inspired by Jack's and Josianne's new *amitié* or by the significance of all these photocopies.

"These are copies of bank records – they were the hardest to obtain – and phone calls and credit card receipts. They speak volumes. Here is a summary of them all." She placed a single sheet of paper squarely before him.

Miniver was fascinated, and then stunned. The single page summarized the last few months' banking transactions, with the personal (and, in Chester's case, professional) credit card debits and phone records, fixed and mobile. One set for Chester du Maine, another for Claire Fleet.

The credit card records were the hardest to interpret, but Mme. Lacrone's homework had been fastidious: it appeared that Chester du Maine went "out" almost every night of his life, or at least during the period in question. But by tracking down the addresses of the shops and restaurants more or less clearly indicated on the credit card sheets – they were "accented" in an electric pink that reminded Miniver of the girl herself – it was possible to establish that Claire had frequently used her own

credit card in approximately the same places, at approximately the same times. So she had been with Chester dozens of times. And how many other times when no credit cards gave the meeting away?

Miniver's conversation with Claire came back to him – accurately, as usual:

"Did you see him often?"

"Yeah. You could say that." He had not meant "often" to this extent.

The telephone records were more obvious: not only had Chester and Claire gone out together a great deal, a very great deal; they had spent a lot of time on the phone.

One detail struck him. There were no calls at all from Claire's phones – she had two, or three counting her office phone – to Chester's fixed home phone. That was not surprising: Helena might have answered. But there were no calls from Chester's phones to Claire's fixed home phone – and yet Noère had no cellphone reception. Miniver knew Claire lived with her mother. Did Claire's mother disapprove of her daughter's friendship with Chester du Maine? Did she know of it?

But it was the banking records that shocked Miniver. For the five months preceding the death of Chester du Maine, fairly large sums of money, usually two or three thousand francs, were more or less regularly drawn in cash from Chester's bank or, for the smaller sums, debited to his credit card. In almost every case a similar, often slightly smaller, sum was deposited in cash into the account of Claire Fleet.

Maybe this was love after all. It certainly looked like more than friendship to Miniver. But an old exclamation rang in his ears: what people said when they discovered something, like "Eureka!" or "Bingo!" Only, in Miniver's ears, the word was "Blackmail!"

*

Miniver was disoriented. On the one hand, there, still in front of him, was his devoted old assistant, waiting for well-earned praise. On the other hand, he was almost keenly distressed to think that Claire Fleet could be guilty of crime or indecency. He gave Mme. Lacrone her praise distractedly, as best he could, and a disappointed old arthritic bear shuffled away. He would, he thought, be sure to make it up to her later.

If this was blackmail, what was Chester du Maine hiding? Miniver supposed that there might be all sorts of things to hide – in his business, from his wife. Helena du Maine did not seem the sort of person you could hide things from, but Chester du Maine was no doubt the sort of person who would try.

No, he would seek no skeletons in Chester's *armoires,* full though they might be of an embarrassment of riches or evils. The trick was to establish whether Claire Fleet could be, or was, a blackmailer. It was the cleaner, simpler question, though to Miniver it was painful.

If Claire Fleet was not blackmailing Chester du Maine, then whatever *was* she doing? The only other plausible explanation was that she had indeed been Chester's mistress. Miniver was something of a ladies' man, and hardly insensitive to the charms of Miss Fleet, but he could not have the ghost of a reason to be jealous. Why was he resisting the only two probable explanations he found before him?

He held a match to his cigar, and decided he just did not want to believe that Claire Fleet was lying to him.

*

Cigars and a little cognac can stimulate marvels in the human mind. Hardly was the cigar finished when Miniver leaned as suddenly forward as his girth permitted, seized the telephone and asked Mme. Lacrone to find out the name of the woman Chester du Maine was living with – "more or less living with," Jack had said – before he met Helena.

Miniver's office was expert in digging up unusual information fast, but this particular bit took a little time. It was almost two days later when Mme. Lacrone lumbered back into his office, with the same shy mysterious smile Miniver had earlier neglected.

"I have," she said, "the name of the woman who was living with Mr. du Maine fifteen years ago. A certain Mary Fleet."

*

Claire Fleet was obviously indispensable to the story Miniver was trying to discover, and there were a lot of details that did not fit. Surely Claire Fleet – or the Fleets – did not just happen to live in the village where Chester's family had had its country house for generations. That was the first question.

The second: Chester du Maine was generous with his pals in small, ordinary ways – drinks and dinners – but as far as Miniver and his team could establish he had never given large sums of money to anyone else – certainly not in the hard business times that had preceded his death. Had he ruined himself for this young woman?

Now that Miniver's doubts were, alas, fully awakened, he found, as one always does, still more to suspect. It was easy to find Claire's employee records and CV in the company files. She was categorically overqualified for her job, in a field where no one with her qualifications went without work. She had a Master's degree, with honors, in microbiology, from a respectable English university. She did not need a Master's in microbiology to be a quality assurance lab technician, and, although this was her first job, she was not earning enough money for someone with her training. Chester du Maine was not paying her enough salary, and yet he was giving her money surreptitiously. Something was missing from the story. Probably a great deal was missing.

Miniver thought, of course, that it was time to meet with Mary Fleet. But something – his avuncular feeling for the girl, perhaps – made him hold back. For some reason – he was surprising himself – he called Claire and asked permission to meet her mother. There was silence on the phone.

"I'd prefer you didn't," she said at last. "Mum's … Mum's a simple soul, and a bit fragile. I don't see how she can help you." Claire said "ow she can elp."

"Claire, I'm on your side." He paused. "I'm sorry, that's a silly thing to say. I'm obviously not exactly on your side. I'm working for an insurance company. But I'm not working against you. I like you. It's just that there's more to your story than you've told me. I know – a lot of people know – about your mother and Chester du Maine. If you don't discuss this with me you're going to wind up discussing it with somebody else – somebody's who's not as loveable as I am. We'd better meet again. Please."

*

This time Miniver thought they could do better than a café. La Tour de Plomb is one of the most famous restaurants in Paris. Miniver imagined it would please Claire to go there. Perhaps he snobbishly thought it would impress her.

When they arrived, the headwaiter obviously knew Claire and asked if she was well. He did not recognize Miniver, who felt miffed: a superbly fat *gourmet* should be as recognizable as a pretty girl. A generous critic would have said that he was simply disappointed not to be offering Claire the exceptional treat he had imagined for her.

He had never loved this restaurant and now wondered why he had chosen it. But Claire was brilliant in electric yellow and two shades of black, and he continued to look forward to their evening, which was already feeling a little non-professional. He had reserved a good table, next to a window overlooking the Seine and Notre-Dame, his favorite cathedral. They had arrived a bit late, even by French standards;

it was now well after nine o'clock. Slowly, one after another, pale lights began illuminating the river and the cathedral stone.

Things took a turn for the even worse when their waiter, obviously an inexperienced boy, regretted that there was no dry sherry for the *apéritif.* "It's not possible that you have no *fino* sherry," insisted Miniver. "Every good restaurant has it. I've drunk it here myself in the past."

The embarrassed boy went away, consulted, and came back without the sherry. Miniver wondered why one of the most famous restaurants in the world would employ an inexperienced adolescent waiter. Things were not what they used to be. They settled for champagne.

He shook off the uneven start to the evening and almost forgot that he was where he was on business. He just enjoyed talking with Claire, and looking at her; there was something exceptionally attractive about her. He had no difficulty understanding Chester's interest, though he flattered himself that his own was of a purer sort. And he had no difficulty understanding why Helena would take this particular mistress – if indeed she had been a mistress – more seriously than the others.

They ordered the house specialty, a complication of duck dishes including blood-rare breast of duck, which most English-speaking diners would have fled. When he chose a fine old burgundy, Claire obviously appreciated and approved, which Miniver appreciated and approved. He thought of the old French adage about not trusting a girl who liked neither cheese nor music nor wine. In spite of himself, he could not help trusting Claire.

Once again they talked long and easily, like old friends, and this reminded Miniver that neither of them was entirely French. He spoke freely about himself, and not as a tactic: of his house in the country, of his children, of his love for both. Claire seemed happy to hear him say such things, and Miniver wondered if she felt they reduced the risk that he would make a pass at her. He wondered whether passes were even made any more, and felt a little old.

Relaxed as he was with her, he nonetheless limited his past wives to two. In the end it seemed only natural, and not at all part of an interrogation, that Claire should also speak at length about herself and her family.

"I suppose the most important thing is me brother Alexis – me half-brother, really. I told you he's handicapped – mentally as well as physically. Mum's not much help – she's sweet and all but she just … well, she doesn't act. She just lets things happen."

She accepted another glass of wine, but she was already losing ground fast to Miniver. "No," she resumed, "that's not exactly true. She helps a lot in the house, and she does what she can with Alexis."

Miniver wondered whether English or French would be called Claire's mother tongue. She said "me brother," which made her sound English. But some of her English, lively as it was, was in fact translated French. That, he thought, was part of what made it vivid.

"It's just that, outside – outside the house, I mean – well, she's a little inexistent. So I've more or less taken care of him – or them – since I was little. Don't mind. Second nature now. We live in a little house in the village. It's all right. The people aren't bad. It's what we've got as home."

Claire had taken off in flight, a beautiful black and yellow insect. Miniver just sat back and drank his burgundy, listening and admiring. Old pro that he was, it hardly occurred to him that she might be deliberately charming him.

Some people have winning smiles, and Claire was one of them. "Alexis has a good heart. When he gets a bit violent it's usually because he's being daft, not nasty. But I can give you an example of the trouble he causes to us. A long time ago, when he was little – he was a beautiful little boy – I found him kicking the cat."

She laughed. "Kicking the cat, to see what would happen."

The fake amethyst – was it fake? – cast purple light on the linen tablecloth before her. "You know, the cat was all growling and … menacing, but he didn't do anything because he knew Alexis, and he wouldn't hurt him. The cat understood. Which is more than you can say about some people." She accepted a little more wine, and her bright eyes clouded.

"Alexis loves cats. Once he and I were playing with the neighbor's cat, and Alexis was surprised that the cat didn't scratch him – cats usually like him and scratch him both – and so he asked why. Turned out the neighbors had had its claws removed, because it was tearing up the ... what do you call the cloth on furniture?"

"Upholstery," said Miniver.

"Yes. It was tearing up the upholstery. And they'd had its voice removed because it meeowed too much. And they'd had it castrated. And Alexis asked if they were going to leave the ears." This made Claire laugh her magic laugh again, and again she seemed strangely moved, and again her eyes clouded.

Miniver was a little alarmed. He did not know her well enough to tell whether she was really becoming upset, but he certainly did not want her sobbing into her burgundy. He changed the subject. "How is it that you wound up in Chester du Maine's village?"

"It's true – you wouldn't know that, would you?" Her ear-rings were metallic pearl this time, and they not only swiveled, they chimed a little. Miniver, of course, was fascinated.

"I was born in Noère. Never met me Dad, but he lived there too. He was French. That's where Mum met Chester. She works there, for a printer."

For a moment, but for a moment only, Miniver was delighted with this bit of information: it eliminated one, at least, of the suspicious details that hovered around this shining, tinkling girl. Almost immediately, alas, he thought of others: the phone records, the money transfers. His old lucid investigative sense was lurking in the corners of this restaurant, picking fights with the girl's charm.

*

For the rest of his life, thought Miniver, he would regret what he was doing. It was not exactly a lie and it was not even in literal contradiction with Claire's wishes. But he knew she would find it hard to forgive him for going to see her mother, even if he did not talk to her, and he felt guilty, though not enough to change his mind.

He could not tell how much it was idle curiosity and how much it was professional need for all the information he could obtain that drove him, this time in a sober, sneaky, anonymous white Renault which enhanced his sense of guilt, to the printer's workshop where Mary Fleet still worked. Sometimes, he thought, his heart beating too hard and too fast, he could be unreasonable. Today was already beginning to look like a mistake.

He had at least prepared his mistake well. The business cards he asked about were so complicated that he had plenty of excuse to linger, while the printer went off to gather the information he had requested. And there, against the chock-a-chock-a-chock pounding rhythm of an ancient Heidelberg offset machine, was Mary Fleet.

She did not look at him. She looked at no one. She served the machine as a slave – not an unhappy slave – might serve her master. She worked for the pounding machine, she fed it paper and she fed it ink. She turned its dials and seemed so much in tune that it was hard to know whether she was in tune with it or it with her.

Her face was simple and young for whatever her age must be. It was a kind of pretty blank. Miniver found it hard to think of anyone in the world who looked less like a murderer. Some minutes passed and the printer still had not returned.

A few minutes make a short period for many things, but a long time to study another person. One does not often have an opportunity to spend a single series of minutes intensely observing someone without being observed. In part because no words were exchanged, Mary Fleet became, for Miniver, a sharp, etching-like image he would not forget, the remarkable mother of a remarkable daughter. He found himself relishing the time he had to look at her, always to the pounding of his heart and the old machine. He felt he was staring into a dream.

The Heidelberg went chock-a-chock. Mary Fleet never looked up, and she never spoke. Once or twice, when he returned, the printer talked to her in casual tones, and she executed whatever order it was he spoke, with grace, but most of all with simplicity. Her hair was covered with a scarf and her body was effectively hidden in bulky, greasy worker's clothes. Her hands were quick, her eyes almost invisible.
Chester du Maine's ex-paramour seemed neither happy nor unhappy. She did not appear to be an independent person. She seemed utterly without boredom, without bitterness, the very image – the lovely image – of simplicity. She radiated, if not a certain tranquility, then a certain almost perfect harmony. She seemed to be what she was doing, and to belong with the machine.

*

The image of Jack Longman and Josianne Gougoux on the other side of Miniver's table was an easier and less memorable experience than that of Mary Fleet. Miniver had still not lost his sense of surprise at seeing his old friend take up with Josianne, but he was in spite of himself a tolerant man, and pleased to see together two people he liked, happy in each other's company.

He could not help wondering about the precise nature of their friendship. At one point, when Josianne was absent, he had said, "Jack, you two aren't …?" But Jack had only laughed.

At another moment, Josianne had taken a thread off the collar of Jack's shirt. That was a form of intimacy, but was it a form of carnal intimacy? Miniver decided he did not want to know.

The vibrator of Jack's portable phone, carefully stashed in his briefcase, began buzzing and humming like a tiny bomb. It made more noise than if Jack had left the ring on. While he fumbled, mumbling apologies, Miniver gleefully remarked that a telephone in a restaurant was worse even than the smell of a cheap cigar.

Since Josianne found almost everything funny, especially these days, she began laughing, loud and long. This caused another button on her blouse, two sizes too small, to come undone. The laugh was vulgar, but real and unaffected. Miniver thought of Dr. Johnson's comment that perpetual gaiety was the most pleasing of qualities.

Jack's discovery of Josianne had reawakened Miniver to qualities in her which he had almost forgotten she had. She was always in a good mood. How did she manage that? It certainly was one of the most agreeable gifts in the world. Even her fat flesh and her tight, sloppy clothes were an envelope for bright good nature.

Jack was engrossed in his phone conversation – so intensely concentrated and so apparently surprised, in fact, that Josianne stopped laughing, made a futile gesture to adjust her clothes and began trying, with Miniver, to pick up what she could of the conversation.

Jack rang off. "That was Mme. Lacrone," he said. "She does research so well that I asked her to do a little more." He was enjoying the suspense, and the attention focused on him.

"Some twenty-six, twenty-seven years ago, Miniver," said Jack, "your sweet, your innocent, your passive Mary Fleet was given a suspended sentence for assault with intent to kill."

*

"Every time I see you, every time I hear from you," Claire said to Miniver, "I have to tell you more – more things that should be not your business. It's like being naked before you." She spoke without resentment and without flirtation.

"So here we go again," she continued. There was something amused in her tone, something resembling friendship, or at least suggesting that telling her story to him was not, after all, disagreeable to her. "We can't talk here. I don't believe you've seen the Roman ruins outside the village. Let's go there."

The wild cherry trees were still in blossom, whitening the adjacent forest, highlighting here and there among the ruins. The sun was warm and spring birds had returned, filling the air.

Claire was wearing grey shoes, black polyester slacks and a red jacket which would have looked cheap on anybody else. Her black ear-rings were huge; she probably did not own any small ones. Miniver had never in his life met anybody else who could get away so finely with sartorial outrage.

"I've never known just what happened. It certainly wasn't like Mum. She's never talked about it and I wasn't even born. The man she attacked was me Dad – me future Dad."

They walked around what was left of the temple: a large mound; stone gutters which once had channeled sacrificial blood; fragments of columns; stone in relief: a naked rider on a horse, worn acanthus leaves. Here and there, vandals or tourists, if there is a difference, had broken off pieces of sculpture.

"He lived with Mum for a while. He's why she came to France in the first place. I think they used to fight a lot. Before I was born, she had an abortion. I think she wanted to make a family with me Dad, but she didn't succeed. And maybe she just lost control of herself when she discovered, or when she realized, that things weren't going to be like that, like what she wanted, she was so disappointed."

Claire grew silent. They walked without speaking across the road to the Roman baths, then sat down on the stone steps of the ancient theater. It was already late and the lingering light was cooler. She sat in shade, almost directly facing the setting sun, speaking as it were to it, instead of him.

With no warning, she jumped years forward. "I think Chester du Maine was in love with Mum. She was certainly in love with him. I was only nine or ten, but I remember. I liked him too – he was fun. He used to make me laugh. He used to buy me things. We didn't have much money then – even less than we have now – and I thought it was terrific, having someone to buy me ice cream and sweets and toys, someone to take me to the amusement park and spoil me. He came for Mum, of course, but I never felt excluded."

Miniver could have asked a dozen questions, but he did not speak. Claire stood up. "Of course, I was then a child."

It was the signal for the end of their conversation – or of her narrative – but Miniver hazarded at least one of his dozen questions. "Why did they separate? How did it end?"

Claire looked away and remained silent for a long time. "Chester du Maine was ambitious – socially ambitious. Of course I didn't know that then. His family had been 'somebody,' I guess, and he wanted it to be somebody again. I don't know. I don't even understand such things now. Let's just say that Mum wasn't the sort of woman Chester would marry, love or no love."

He could not remember seeing bitterness on Claire's face before. It too became her.

*

Miniver flicked on his portable computer – he thought electricity was too expensive in Europe to leave a computer on all the time – and poured himself a glass of armagnac. Brandy, unlike electricity, cost less than it did in America.

Reading email was for Miniver almost as fully meditative as reading Baudelaire or Ben Jonson, and so a ritual went with it. He rarely chose to read a letter without first preparing a cup of coffee or a thin crystal snifter of brandy and a cigar, like the montecristo he had just lit. The light from the screen illuminated his face as he touched the keys: as usual, he had not turned on the overhead lights in the office.

Vous avez du courrier. The cigar was burning beautifully. He clicked the email open. It was in French.

"Meet me in the forest of Compiègne tomorrow evening at 11:00 p.m., in the Beaux Monts at the G-19 intersection. I can tell you what happened to Chester du Maine."

There was no signature.

*

Miniver and Jack were walking in the *jardins du Luxembourg*. Miniver was trying to explain something about the French *Sénat* but Jack was in no mood to listen. "Miniver, it's gonna take me days to find out who sent that email – if I can find out at all. You'd be outa your mind to go."

"If I don't I may never find out what happened. This business is becoming foggier by the day."

Jack said nothing about Miniver's cigar; at least they were outside. "Then let me go with you," he said again. "I can hold myself in reserve. Hidden. If you don't need me you won't even see me."

"Jack, I'm touched – I'm deeply touched by your insistence. And I know you're an experienced hunter, a man who could stay as nearly invisible as a man can be. But consider. If there is danger, this person or these persons may arrive early, may be several, may stake themselves out so well that they'll see everything you do. Which makes it a risk for you as well as for me. And if there is no danger, but you're seen, you may scare away somebody who's trying to help us."

"Help us in the middle of a forest at 11:00 at night?"

"Surely you don't think I'll be going unprotected? You know I'm a good shot. You know my army service. We've hunted together. I even know the forest of Compiègne – like the back of my hand. That, in fact, is one of the questions I've been asking myself: does the emailer know I know that forest? If he doesn't, it's an advantage for me."

"Wait until I can trace the sender. New York is already on it."

"By the time you find out it'll be too late. I suspect that all you're going to find is some cybercafé anyway. Look – there are the *marionettes*. It's a delight to watch the children watch the *marionettes:* they shout at them, they talk to them, they make it real. Let's buy tickets."

But Jack was far too distressed for *marionettes*, and Miniver was so moved by his friend's concern that he did not insist.

*

It was very late in the evening. Miniver stood alone in the dark in his office and watched the magic lights of Neuilly and Paris below. In the distance he could see the *arc de triomphe,* glowing in spotlight.

He had a small apartment in the center of Paris but he often avoided it, finding it lonely. He phoned home – his real home, his home in the country. He talked with his wife and with those of the children who were not yet in bed. He missed them.

It was hard to tell whether the melancholy he was feeling was a bittersweet trifle of homesickness, or the vague but strong sadness he had seen glowing around Claire Fleet like a halo, or something more philosophical. Or simply fear of the approaching visit to the forest of Compiègne. The red blinking lights, the yellow or white automobile headlights, the flashing advertising lights all worked their business down below, in perfect silence. In fact, he thought, it was all these things together. Standing alone at a city window was an icon for the human condition.

Miniver was not making much progress. He had certainly acquired a good idea of Chester du Maine and his world, but he felt no closer to knowing whether Chester had died a natural death or not, and that after all was what he was being paid for. And if Chester had been murdered, Miniver had almost no idea who the murderer might be. The next day's encounter in the forest might make the difference, but somehow he doubted it.

He poured himself a glass of VSOP cognac and lit a cigar, turning it slowly around the match flame in the dark, to be sure it burned evenly. To his distracted satisfaction, it did.

The French had a shrewd judicial saw, *"A qui profite le crime?"* The Americans too, he thought, but he could not remember just how they put it. All the people he could think of who might have benefited from Chester du Maine's death were connected with the company – a whole companyful of them. Minus, maybe, Claire, who had no visible interest. He had been holding the spotless crystal snifter in his hand, to warm the cognac, and now he took a sip. It was huge and invigorating.

Miniver Lafritte was at ease and out of place in several countries, and at home in none: unconsciously, he spoke of "the Americans," not of "us." He wondered if Claire and her mother were like that too – foreigners in France and foreigners in England too.

Keys fumbled in the lock. Josianne and Jack entered the outer rooms. Miniver wondered what they could be doing at the office at such an hour.

*

They were an antidote to melancholy. Josianne was usually just too busy being happy to be sad, and Jack, it seemed, had learned from her. Soon they were all installed, as the French say, each with a snifter of cognac.

Jack had explained that, down below, they had seen lights on in the office. It was true that the lights in one of the outer rooms were on.

To Jack's disgust, Josianne accepted a small cigar – the usual little Davidoff. The conversation turned back to speculation. "'Ask who benefits from the crime,' as you say," said Jack. "And the one person who benefits is Helena du Maine. Only Helena du Maine."

"Don't be too eager to find what your company might prefer to find, Jack – and don't forget you'd have to prove it. In the first place, we're as far as ever from knowing whether a murder occurred. And in the second place, Helena du Maine isn't the only person who could benefit from such a crime." Who, Miniver was thinking, wanders among these office buildings at night?

"No, she isn't," agreed Josianne, in English. "Can't you see zat, Jack? It's a good sing IBI pays us to figure zese sings." Josianne's English was not bad but her accent was homemade.

"William Sargent is so devoted to his job – and, I think, to Best Chester, its reputation, its employees – that he could do almost anything in its interest. Rarely in my life have I seen anyone who lived his work to that extent."

"But," said Jack, "there's no evidence whatsoever for any involvement on his part. Not any that you've told me about."

"Indeed," said Miniver. "But we're talking about who could profit from the putative crime. Sargent could have seen good in the death of Chester du Maine."

"True," said Jack. "Glad to see you're earning your keep."

"And there are other 'interests,'" continued Miniver. "Jean Lefevre seems to have detested Chester du Maine from just about every point of view, and of course especially from a union point of view. Lefevre's smart. He knows a company can't give anything to its workers if it goes bust. And he knew Chester was running the company into a hole. Worse, he seems to have held him personally responsible for twenty firings and more to come. I have no doubt that Jean Lefevre hated Chester du Maine, and rejoiced at his death."

"And once again, there's no evidence even to suggest…."

"Yes, there is," said Miniver. "Lefevre once more or less threatened Chester – threatened him with death. It's in our report, Jack. Read the reports. You're trifling your business time away with my charming assistant."

Josianne beamed. Miniver noticed that her undersized blouse was slightly torn at the seam, under the right armpit. "And the same information's in the company records, which is where I found it. Lefevre made his threat publicly. That, by the way, tends to make me discount it."

"Helena du Maine," said Josianne, "made her threat publicly too."

"So she did," said Jack. "But she did in any case make the threat, and she surely has the most to gain."

"Sometimes," said Miniver, "what you gain is less important than what you might not lose."

"Theoretically, Helena still looks to me like our best bet. What about Claire Fleet and her mother?"

"I don't know, Jack. I just don't know." Something made Miniver want to avoid the subject of Claire and Mary Fleet. He knew that he was not being objective, that he did not want to think that Claire and her mother were involved in something evil. And he knew that, if he fled the possibility, he did so because it existed.

"So what now? What's the next step?"

"Another, in the same direction. Then another, and another, step by step. Maybe I'll find out in the forest tomorrow night."

Miniver decided that there was a reasonable explanation for their arrival: Jack and Josianne had deliberately tracked him down in the office in order to keep him company, the night before he left for Compiègne. The explanation had at least the advantage of making him feel loved.

*

In Miniver's opinion – he was given to this kind of unattackable reasoning – his drive to Compiègne was going to end with the information he wanted, or in violence, or in something else. The something else seemed to him the most probable, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He passed delicate pale blue fields of flax (this was exactly the brief flowering season). What a pity, he thought, that people don't use flax for linen any more. He never had quite known what it was that people no longer did with linseed oil, but provisionally he added the decline of it to his mental list of Things that Are Wrong in a Degenerate World.

A good dinner – a last dinner? – at his old pal Pierre's Compiègne restaurant was, on the other hand, a Something Right. Miniver had already reserved the discreet corner table by the back window.

Pierre was as usual too busy in his kitchens to dine with Miniver, but he found time to share a bottle of Guigal côte-rôtie with him. The *vol-au-vent* was the best of Miniver's life, and this was just the season for morel mushrooms – the finest in the world. The unctuous *vol-au-vent* sauce was full of them, and every single one contributed a tiny bit of joy to Miniver's existence. The two old friends agreed that the wine was a little too big for the *plat.*

Miniver had to leave very early, given the dining habits Pierre knew him to have. Explaining that he had a rendezvous brought guffaws, accompanied by what Pierre considered to be perfect understanding. Miniver did not disabuse him: it was useful for a man to maintain a certain reputation in France.

He arrived at the appointed spot – he knew it well, but had also verified it on the French Army Forest Map – almost an hour early. He knew that an hour was by no means enough to be sure of being the first one there, but man does not live by survival alone. Besides, most of the time he found it difficult to believe this rendezvous was dangerous, or even real.

The leaves of the oaks and the beech trees were not yet fully out and, in the lengthening light of a Spring season already approaching the solstice, he could still see far into the forest. No one was there. Nothing moved.

He took time to choose his position, because he wanted to be both invisible and comfortable. He found a downed beech trunk, one of the many the occasional violent winds, come down from the north, had turned over in their wake. The last such winds had come that winter. The overthrown trees continued to blossom and leaf, and Miniver was able to install himself behind a sort of budding screen. He took out his .38 Special – a tiny, ultra-light revolver with a titanium barrel not two inches long, useable only for close-range protection but so small he could almost conceal it in his hand. He deactivated the safety and held it under his palm on his knee.

A long time passed. If he had spent time finding a good place, it was not exactly because he required physical well-being. In fact, Miniver had a Socratic reputation for endurance, for an ability to do without sleep, food or drink for surprisingly long periods. It was just that, when he could have the comforts of life, he liked them to be of great quality. As a hunter, he had known many immobile, posted hours. An old New England road sign came to mind: "Pick your rut carefully; you'll be in it for a long time."

*

A long time indeed. The last day birds had quieted and eleven o'clock was past. Other than the cry and the occasional pure, silent flyby of an owl, there was nothing here. He could smell the sweet post-winter rot of the forest floor. The clouds passed overhead, turning the forest moonlight off and on.

More time passed. Sometimes an aged beechnut or acorn that had not fallen in its season crashed down through the sparse leaves and thumped, startling, provoking a split instant of nocturnal fear in all who heard it, including Miniver. He realized that for some time now he'd had his finger on the trigger.

At last he thought he heard something – vague steps, far in the distance. It took time to determine the direction: south, southeast. That meant that whatever was approaching was doing so against the moonlight, reducing Miniver's chances of seeing him. He regretted having come without infra-red night glasses.

The steps came on, hesitantly. The clouds covered and uncovered the nearly-full moon and Miniver's eyes did their best to adjust. He knew how to look away, then look back, so as not to lose whatever he was looking for in night light – it was an old plane-spotting trick – but the truth was that his eyes were aging. He could not see as

well in the dark as he used to. Moving his head too slowly, he hoped, to be seen, he tried to use the largest available trees to block the big moonlight.

The noise grew in the murk. Now the steps were very close, and seemed to be coming directly at him. Surely it was not possible that he had been seen? Miniver had not anticipated having anyone this close to him, not at least without being able to perceive what was happening. Unconsciously, his finger tightened on the trigger.

The steps came on, irregularly, but directly toward him. Then heavy clouds covered the moon. The forest went dark.

Still the steps came on. He couldn't shoot without warning, not at least without asking who was there, although he'd let the steps approach much more closely than he had intended – and he couldn't challenge now without making himself vulnerable. But he had no choice.

He spoke in French. "*Qui est là?*"

The steps stopped, just an instant. There was no answer. Then a great crashing into the leaves, three short, sharp pistol reports, two higher in pitch, one lower, and three flames in the night, two from one side, one from the other.

*

Some French hospitals look American, all antiseptic plastic, glass and aluminum. Other French hospitals look as dirty and dangerous as all hospitals are, but have a little architectural grace. *L'hôpital St-Joseph* was of the latter kind. Paint peeled off cracked walls, but the French doors rose ten feet and looked out onto old courtyards full of *rosiers grimpants* and huge, ancient trees. If you were in the hospital for low-risk repair, soon ready to walk back out in one piece, it was not a bad place to be.

Jack could not stop laughing, but Josianne, for once, did not quite dare join him. Miniver was, after all, her boss.

"That's the worst shooting I've heard of in years!" He wiped away a tear. "At, what? Three feet? And two shots?" Jack choked on the last words, which were hardly comprehensible.

"What, are you complaining? Lucky we weren't both killed. And lucky we weren't picked up by a forest guard." Miniver was of two minds about his friend's reaction. On the one hand, like almost everyone in the world, he did not enjoy being made fun of. On the other, he knew a good joke when he saw one, even if it was on himself, and he saw one now.

"Only time in my life I've fired in panic. Never even made the decision. The thing just went off in my hand. No doubt that's why I didn't kill him."

"Oh, yeah. Good thing it wasn't your murderer. You woulda missed him too." Tears were running down Jack's face. Josianne decided she could join in now too, or could not any longer resist.

"Well, Jeez, Jack, maybe you wouldn't have done so much better yourself." Miniver was still trying to look grave, but rapidly losing ground to the general hilarity. "Damn near soiled myself out there on that tree. You try it sometime."

Waves and wails and shrieks of tears and laughter. "But I wouldn't have gone, Miniver! You're the one dumb enough to go out there all alone in the first place."

The usual doses of brandy, sneaked into the hospital, failed to quiet the storm – *au contraire* – but time did not. When Miniver found himself alone again, with Gérard snoring next to him, he thought of three things, and only one of them was particularly happy or flattering.

First: had the person who had fixed the rendezvous in the forest actually come, and been warned away by the sound of the shots?

Second: if not, was the whole thing just some sort of complex practical joke?

Third: he knew that Jack's glee had been inspired in good part at his relief to see him home and alive. He emptied his glass and smiled.

*

When Mme. Lacrone arrived, with two bouquets of flowers, it was necessary to tell the story again.

Jack had been so worried about Miniver's forest caper that he had discussed it with Josianne. Josianne was generally as good at keeping professional secrets as she was bad at keeping the others, but in this case she made a large mistake, and told Gérard.

Gérard was as devoted to his boss as Gérard's impulsive wire-haired hunting *griffon cortal* was devoted to him. Unfortunately, Gérard did not take the dog with him; unfortunately Gérard knew the rendezvous point as well as Miniver did, from their having hunted there together; and unfortunately Gérard went armed with his enormous, magnificent and unspeakably deadly six-inch .357 magnum Colt Python, which Gérard generally used for shooting meets, and which he prized, since it was a gift from Miniver, who had not at the time thought he might be shot with it.

So Gérard had gone off in the middle of the night, and his Colt had too. He had intended to help of course, got lost in the dark and panicked. Neither he nor anyone else ever knew whether he meant to fire or tripped and accidentally discharged his revolver, but he nearly killed his boss.

During the entire episode he had not once said "no *problème*," but he might as well have. Miniver had returned fire, twice, but in the dark and with such an inaccurate weapon he missed both times, or almost missed: one of the .38 Specials had rather nastily grazed Gérard's leg, which upon reflection Miniver thought served him right.

Gérard was just wounded enough to need a tourniquet – and to be carried. Miniver was an extraordinarily strong man, but he had no wind. While struggling with nearly two hundred pounds of Groaning Bad News, in the dark over rough terrain, he tripped and badly sprained his ankle.

It took both Josianne and Mme. Lacrone hours on the telephone to eliminate all danger of police inquiries into just what had happened, to suppress the usual Firearms Injury Report (thereby using up some of Miniver's precious credits with the various officials in question), and to arrange for the togetherness of keeping the two men in the same room of St Joseph's for the twenty-four hours of their stay. The worst of it was that Miniver came off looking as silly as Gérard.

*

"We found out who sent you the email, Miniver," said Jack, enjoying the suspense again. "Somebody who apparently thinks a maverick address and a pseudonym are enough to give people privacy, or anonymity, on the Internet." There was triumph in his voice.

"Are you going to get around to naming him?"

"Jean Lefevre." Miniver was no more surprised to hear this name than any other, since he had not managed to suspect anyone in particular. He still could see no special plausibility or cause.

"Jean Lefevre," said Miniver. "Why Jean Lefevre?"

"Well as a matter of fact I think I know why." Now there was outright triumph in Jack's voice – the triumph of trumping the master. The Great Forest Caper had not been Miniver's finest hour. His reputation had suffered, and some of the respect he was used to and fond of had begun to fade.

"I took the liberty of asking Josianne and Mme. Lacrone to help me get the police onto Lefevre – not of course for anything that happened in Compiègne. Just for sending a threatening message."

"Not smart, Jack!" Miniver was suddenly speaking sharply. "Least of all in a case as serious as this. You know that kind of initiative is absolutely against our understanding!"

Jack sobered. "Well, yes, and I'm sorry if I overstepped my bounds. It is after all an IBI investigation."

"It's my investigation, Jack. And if you want to continue to work with me, you're going to have to do better than this." Miniver was not as angry as he seemed. Some of his tone was there for the principle, and some no doubt as a sort of antivenin for an ailing reputation.

Silence ensued. In any case, Miniver was more than curious about the results of questioning Lefevre. "So what did you find out?"

"Well ... it looks like it doesn't mean much of anything. I dunno. Lefevre sent the damn message when he was drunk, for a start. And I don't think he ever went to Compiègne. He says he was in Le Blanc-Mesnil. We're checking that out now. He appears to have a good alibi."

"Maybe. But there are other things a man can do when he's drunk. He doesn't have to send me a threatening message."

"Yeah. Of course, it wasn't exactly threatening, you know. I already had a lot of trouble with the police over that. Nothing explicitly wrong with the message at all. Jo had to call up several old favors before the police would intervene, even for questioning."

"Do you know how hard it is in France to keep a *piston*, Jack?" A *piston* was somebody inside who owed you favors, or who at least wanted to do you some. "Don't use up my credits."

Jack was by now sufficiently cowed, and Miniver sufficiently placated. "So why did he email me?"

"Well, it seems he just wanted to cause you trouble – unless of course it was to throw you off the track. Appears he has a thing for Helena du Maine. Not that she's *involved* with him, of course. He just thinks she's a god on wheels. Or a goddess, I guess. Thinks she saved the company in the past and is gonna do it again. Thinks she's a great lady. And he found out – probably through company or union channels

– that you were asking a lot of questions about her. He didn't like that. Maybe he sent you that email just to complicate your life."

Miniver recalled something Lefevre had once said, to precisely that effect.

Jack hesitated before deciding that good relations had been sufficiently restored, then added two words:

"Sure worked."

"OK, Jack. Thanks for the information. Don't take any more initiatives or I'll double my fee. I'm calling Josianne right now to be sure the police drop everything with regard to Lefevre. The whole business is stupid. He's alerted now."

Jack left, but one of his comments stayed: "Lefevre just wanted to cause you trouble – unless of course it was to throw you off the track."

*

The season aged. The cherry and wild cherry blossoms had passed. Birds filled the branches, first to consume the insects, then to eat the early fruit. This was the beginning of what the French call cherry time, *le temps des cerises*. Virtual summer, with the longest days of the year, dinner in the garden until after eleven. It was the season of *la dolce vita francese*.

Nothing more had been heard or learned of Jean Lefevre. Little by little, by a sort of benign neglect, he disappeared from the draft, the sketch of a story on which Miniver Lafritte felt he was making no progress. No one who looked like a murderer had been discovered, and nothing that looked like murder. The medical irregularity began to seem more and more ordinary – an oddity, perhaps, but nothing more. Chester du Maine had died of a heart attack. The world went on.

The world went on, and IBI was running out of excuses for not paying Helena du Maine two hundred million French francs.

*

Every time Miniver met with Claire he liked her more, and more of her story opened. He was unsure to what extent the one was connected to the other, but he remained vaguely afraid for her. She had answered the question of what she was doing in Chester du Maine's village, but, after what were becoming frequent meetings with her, Miniver still had not even broached the subject of the financial transactions.

He knew it was more than time to do so, but he was scared – not just of the possible explanation, any explanation he could imagine, but also of Claire's reaction to his intrusion. Things had already been delicate enough with Helena du Maine.

Not knowing how to go about it, not knowing how to ask Claire about her private finances, to ask her to explain large anomalous sums of money, Miniver decided to put it all off once again and have a good lunch on the terrace of a nearby café. He loved lunches on sunny terraces – truth to tell, Miniver would have loved lunches in a coal-bin – and he loved an open French market, like the one opposite this particular terrace.

Merchants in white aprons were calling out the virtues of their carrots and lettuce, their goat's cheese and pink mushrooms and duck and rabbit *pâté*, and there was nothing quite like a French market vendor.

"Come, ladies, come! Look at the size of my cucumber!"

Somehow, right from the start, Miniver had believed there was a proper explanation of this money business.

He opened a brown paper package. To top things off, to accompany him in his happy, solitary meal from *apéritif* to coffee, a book had just arrived from the States: *The Collected Poems of Thomas, Lord Vaux.*

For Miniver, this was one of the delights of life, far more even than *foie gras* and fine wine, though it never hurt to bring them all together. Renaissance poetry was one of the crutches that helped him limp through modern times. He propped the book against his cheap wine jug, already spreading stains. He had never known how to keep books pristine, he lived with them so completely, but he was a happy man.

Over espresso he returned Jack's call, since Jack, as usual, had not been able to reach him during lunch; Miniver almost never forgot to turn the phone off in a restaurant, in church or at a concert. He was more likely to forget to turn it on.

Noises and crashes during phone conversations with Jack were becoming a habit. This time it sounded like overturning tables and chairs, with their contents and maybe their occupants.

Miniver guessed they were still at La Belle Crasse, and at first he thought the owner was ousting an undesirable client, as he violently did from time to necessary time, but Jack explained that Gérard was with them. With a still-bandaged leg, thought Miniver, he was even clumsier than before. Miniver heard Gerard's embarrassed apologies in the background, and the cackling of Mme. Lacrone. Probably because

she thought he was a kind of living proof of a man's adorable incompetence, Mme. Lacrone always found Gérard cacklable.

Apparently the whole gang was there. Josianne's laughter, rising from time to time to a vulgar shriek, floated over it all.

"Sorry to interrupt your vaudeville, Jack, but you called me a while back."

"Indeed I did, and with news you could never guess, so I won't ask you to. Jo, *please*!"

Another crash. Miniver was trying to wipe a coffee stain off his new book.

"You know," Jack continued, "Claire Fleet had been depositing money in her bank account that corresponded pretty closely to Chester's transactions."

"Of course. I have the dates and figures in my computer and most of them in my head."

"Well put this one in your head, Miniver: since Chester's death Claire has continued to make similar deposits. Three so far. They don't correspond to Chester's transactions, no doubt largely because he's dead. But all three correspond to the transactions of … Helena du Maine."

*

Miniver had not expected this. It took him two cigars just to digest the news. What it meant – or, rather, what it strongly seemed to mean – was blackmail.

Blackmail, of course, had already been in the air: the money Claire was receiving had to be either gifts – the kind of gift a man makes to his mistress – or blackmail. Miniver had had to consider the possibility, the strong possibility, that Claire Fleet knew something that Chester was paying her to keep quiet. Now, it appeared, Claire knew something – about Chester? – about Chester and Helena? – about the company? – which both husband and wife had wanted to keep quiet.

The company. Helena had more or less officially taken over the management of it when her husband died, but that did not shed light on anything. It seemed in fact to turn lights out. And even if he found out why this money was changing so many hands, thought Miniver as he drained his demitasse – even then he would not necessarily know how Chester du Maine died.

Nonetheless, this was a relatively welcome new twist, if only because it offered another excuse for not immediately confronting Claire. The way forward now seemed to be to go to Helena du Maine and confront her. So Miniver did.

*

Helena du Maine's poise was as remarkable as always, but the grey eyes that had once charmed now chilled; they seemed as cold as the blue of the teacups. Miniver wondered how much of the change was her response to his increasing suspicions. Who could blame her for cooling at accusation? In any case, the tone of their meeting was no longer the same.

"Your visits, Mr. Lafritte, are becoming … disagreeable. You appear to believe that my husband was murdered, and you seem to believe that both he and I have paid blackmail to Miss Fleet. Have you any earthly reason, anything faintly resembling proof, or even possibility, to support such claims?"

Miniver's position was more than awkward. It was, he vaguely felt, outrageous to be thinking such thoughts, much less to be speaking them aloud to the widow. He had no proof, and small reason, to think what his questions implied – worse, he did not even really have a hunch, a feeling that he was on the right trail.

"Forgive me, madame. On the first count, you know it's standard procedure, when a large life insurance policy exists, to investigate all circumstances of a death. So in that sense I'm only doing what people call my 'job' – you yourself were kind enough to say something similar once. The second count flows out of the first: having discovered these … unusual financial transactions, I cannot allow myself not to ask about them."

"You spend ever more of your time asking me for forgiveness. I am no longer inclined to give it. I can tell you nothing you do not already know about the nature of my husband's death. I have believed from the start that he died of a heart attack and I see no reason to believe otherwise now. You have given me no reason to believe otherwise."

He did not turn his gaze from the pearl cold of her eyes. Helena du Maine, still a young and lovely woman, sat with rigid grace in her antique armchair. "As for the … financial transactions, you have no proof that money has passed from me, or from my late husband, to Miss Fleet."

Miniver twisted his girth uncomfortably. The chair was from the period of Louis XVI; in spite of a certain corporeal similarity between Miniver and that king, such

chairs seemed never to allow for substantial personages like them. And Madame du Maine was hardly making him less uncomfortable.

"I would be grateful to hear you tell me that no such money has been given."

Helena du Maine had not for some time been drinking her tea. Now she put down the cup with a tiny trace of such violent emphasis that Miniver was startled.

"Why on earth would I tell you that? Am I under suspicion? Must I earn your confidence? Whatever passes between my family and the Fleets is our private business and none whatsoever of yours."

It was the first time, thought Miniver, that he had ever heard Helena du Maine make a mistake in her English.

"I think, Mr. Lafritte, that this would be an appropriate time to conclude our interview."

Three minutes later he was in the busy, noisy Paris street. A man walked by with two baguettes under his arm, munching on a piece of one of them. A large delivery truck had blocked all the traffic. It was not much after six o'clock, but those restaurants and cafés with sidewalk tables were already setting them for dinner, no doubt for the Northern tourists, who dined earlier than the French and didn't seem to notice automobile exhaust fumes.

The weather was good, which was in favor of finding a taxi, but the hour was bad. Still, Miniver could not yet walk long distances on his weak ankle. A snatch of an old blues song came to him:

I feel like walkin' but I don't know where to go.

*

Miniver dined with Claire several times more – enough for them to begin genuine friendship, and distinctly more often than Miniver's business with her required. Claire seemed to enjoy dinners with him in good part because he enjoyed them – the rare wines, the exquisite food, the crystal and the silver. She appreciated it all; she was in fact something of a connoisseur, but most of all she seemed to like seeing him shine – perform, she might almost have said – at a table.

Nonetheless she did not want to go out frequently, and Miniver came to understand that this was because she wanted to be with her brother. As an alternative, or a compromise, they met several more times in the Roman ruins outside Noère, which

were a short and pleasant walk away, and it was during these visits that Miniver's perceptions of and feelings for the boy were transformed.

Alexis was in a special school all day during the week, but in these early summer evenings, and on holidays and weekends, often he would go along with them. Claire rarely took her eyes off him, even while she was speaking with Miniver, and this gave her a distant quality when she was with her brother. She was usually strict with him, but it was clear that she loved his company.

The boy grew on Miniver, who was habitually rather contained and reserved. Alexis had uncontained him, and at the same time had not been who he was supposed to be, or at least who Miniver had supposed he was.

In the beginning he, Miniver, had suffered from the ill ease people typically feel around the handicapped. At their first meeting Alexis had marched right up to him, so close he almost knocked him over, and stared at him with a big, stupid grin. Miniver had looked away, but he had never looked away again.

Seen from a certain point of view, or with a certain eye, the boy was handsome. His straw-colored hair and his pale blue eyes reminded Miniver of a strange version of his sister Claire. Miniver sometimes thought that, of two people alone in a room with Alexis, one of them might have seen a mistake, or a sort of failure, but the other might have seen an unexpected order, a different register.

Once, while the three of them were walking, Alexis had taken his hand. There had been in this gesture for Alexis, and so for Miniver, a satisfaction, a fundamental content, which had made Miniver think of his own remote childhood. In the space of a few weeks, Miniver was learning to cherish this different boy.

The strong sun burned. Claire was off somewhere, perhaps deliberately leaving the two alone together, as she had come sometimes to do. Alexis, his hair like gold, walked over to Miniver and sat down beside him on the Roman stones. Miniver was now not only comfortable around him; he was extremely fond of him. The boy's strangeness had long since disappeared.

Alexis scribbled in the dust with Miniver's cane. Miniver, squinting grotesquely against the sun in his eyes, asked him if he'd had fun in school that week. Alexis smiled and said yes. Miniver asked him if it was interesting. Alexis acted as if he had not heard and scribbled away.

Miniver was now used to these long pauses – Alexis's pauses, or simply the silences of intimacy. He said no more, and waited.

Finally Alexis stopped scribbling and looked hard into Miniver's face. "No," he said. "Not interesting. Fun, not interesting." Miniver no longer noticed the blurred speech.

These were times when Miniver utterly forgot he had a job. He had always been an enthusiastic man; here and now, he felt, he was also a happy man.

*

The Chester du Maine case was not one that would increase Miniver Lafritte's reputation, or his pride in himself, as an investigator. In the past he had moved and indeed in the future he would move brilliantly to the bottom of murky things. But he suspected that, without Claire Fleet's ... what? help? confessions? *confidences*? – he would have drowned in these particular troubled waters.

The days went by, and brother and sister continued to grow in the affections of the aging fat man. There were times when Alexis would sit for hours, rocking and listening to his favorite music, the blues. Once Miniver brought Alexis a gift of the music of Son House, Miniver's own favorite blues singer. The two sat together a long time, listening repeatedly to "The Empire State Blues," Alexis swaying and occasionally chortling, Miniver motionless. Claire watched them together. At such times she did not speak.

She was opening to him as completely as Helena du Maine had closed. Once she had seemed to tell him why. "I like you. You're the age me Dad would be – probably is, I don't know. I'd've liked to have a Dad like you." He could have been displeased by her implicit and sexless reference to his age, but he was moved.

And she had said, repeatedly, that she had nothing to hide, although as it turned out she had rather a lot to hide, and rather a lot she'd hidden.

*

The conjunction of late June and early July is perhaps the most loved time of the year. People and birds were gorging themselves on cherries and wild cherries. At the feet of the wild cherry trees among the Roman ruins, wasps were getting drunk on the fallen, fermenting fruit. They were literally drunk, flying crazily around, hitting trees and, strangely, not often stinging, even when they bumped into people.

Alexis was delighted with the wasps, and Claire was a little preoccupied with keeping him safe. She found some wasp-free wild cherries and gave them to him, demonstrating by eating some herself. He understood and began, with noisy delight, to pick and eat all he could reach. Claire and Miniver sat on one of the stone seats of the Roman theater and watched him.

As was now often the case, they spoke of her brother. "Alexis can't read or write. He talks funny: sometimes a lot better than most people do, and then sometimes it's just daft, or at least not even I understand. He feels passion for music. He once spent hours playing the same string on a friend's cello – it was the same open string, all the time, but there was something fine about it. I'd like him to have a cello – he was very careful with my friend's, even though he's often clumsy. Before he died, Chester was talking about buying him one. Sometimes I wonder if he could actually learn to play. I wouldn't say it's impossible."

There was a long pause in their conversation. A cuckoo in the nearby woods was still announcing spring.

"Alexis," said Claire, "is Chester du Maine's son."

*

How could Miniver not have guessed, not even have suspected? In retrospect he felt like the last person to know, or to realize. He replied nothing, but the information seemed almost immediately to become natural, incorporated into the normal. Innumerable pieces fell into place, although he would still need Claire's help to complete the picture.

"I don't know all the story," said Claire, "for obvious reasons. I was ten when Alexis was born. I was a little child." She did not pronounce the sound of "t" in the word "little." Perhaps under the influence of Claire's huge announcement, Miniver reflected that, as he had come to like, to care for, even to admire her brother, so he had come to be charmed by an accent he had once contemned.

"And Mum never told me much. I just had to figure things out meself."

He was as hypnotized, fixed on every word. Claire spoke easily and continued to watch her brother.

"I told you once that Mum had an abortion – back when she was with me Dad. I guess that would have been me big sister or brother. You know she was very unhappy then. That's how she got in trouble with the law."

Unhappy indeed, thought Miniver, afraid to speak. Trouble with the law indeed. She tried to kill a man. But he said nothing.

Alexis was finally stung; he screamed. Claire calmed him as much by not taking his screams too seriously as she did by sucking the dart out of his finger. Then she heated the venom with the flame from a cigarette lighter – Alexis watched her

solemnly and did not protest – and they moved farther from the wild cherry tree. The boy climbed to the top of the old Roman theater and rolled down its grassy slopes, shrieking with laughter. Claire smiled, but her smile was frail.

"Sixteen, seventeen years ago Mum met Chester du Maine. I don't even know how they met. We almost lived together. I saw him all the time. I've told you that. And fifteen years ago Mum was pregnant.

"I've never known exactly what happened. There was some sort of morning-after birth-control pill, and Chester insisted she take it and she didn't want to. There was a terrible fight – I remember very well hearing it, the screams, the accusations. I cried in me bed. I think Mum had always assumed that she and Chester'd stay together and rear a family.

"He made her take the pill – I mean, he didn't force her physically or anything, he just insisted. And she took it, and she was crying and crying. I'd never seen Mum like that.

"Chester left and we didn't see him again – but that, I think, was because we went back to England almost immediately, and I know Mum didn't want him to know where we were. She didn't want to see him again.

"Because the thing was, you see – she vomited up the pill. I don't know when and I don't know why. Was she sick or did she vomit it up on purpose? But she vomited it up. And nine months later Alexis was born."

*

They walked along the dirt road that ran from the ruins to a nearby farm, Claire and Alexis hand in hand. The boy rarely paid attention to adult conversation; there was no impediment to continuing Claire's monologue.

In any case Alexis was perfectly distracted by Miniver's cane. It had a *fantastique* crazy-man's silver head, tongue stuck out, spider on top of the bald skull. The boy was fascinated. Miniver was largely recovered from his injury and handed the cane once again to Alexis. Wheat and corn were rising fast on either side of them. Skylarks rose from the fields and warbled in the sky, so high it was difficult to make them out.

"Chester never knew he had a son until I told him. That must have been one of the biggest surprises of his life. I don't know which dominated – his shock – his thrill? – at having a son, or his horror at having a handicapped child. For a long time he said nothing.

"He never did ask much about Alexis and he never asked to meet him, but I think he would have done if he'd lived. There were signs."

The boy began using the cane to batter every red poppy he could see – only the poppies.

"He didn't want to meet his son – not straight away – but he wanted to help us financially. The very next time I saw him he asked me if I'd accept some financial support. He was pretty tactful about it. I saw no problem with that. Mum and I have never had much money, and Chester was just taking care of his own son – and just maybe, I think, his son's mother too. And me."

Miniver risked a question. "What did Helena du Maine know of this?"

"At first I don't think she knew anything. It was worse than that, in fact – she thought we were lovers, Chester and I. Helena's smart, and she could see Chester was very … moved about something, in a way that had never been true with his other "floozies" – that's what she called them. So she got worried, and upset, and that's when there was that confrontation in a restaurant about which you found out."

He was strangely conscious of the French in her English, like a man looking through the wrong end of a telescope. "When she threatened to kill you both."

"Yes. It was very embarrassing. After Helena left, Chester and I got the hell out." Claire said "got the 'ell out."

"We just left money on the table and ran. Never went back."

The boy approached, took Claire's hand again and stared at her. He knew she was moved. For a while she was silent. "Helena du Maine's a good woman. She would never have hurt either one of us. People sometimes say things they don't mean, you know. Or things that aren't true."

Alexis continued to stare at his sister. After massacring the poppies, he had gathered some of the survivors into a bouquet. If they were for Claire, he had forgotten. The poppies were already wilting redly in his pale hand.

"In any case, some time after that – I don't know when, exactly – Helena learned the truth. I still never saw her but I could tell from how Chester was freer – freer to meet with me, not worried about her knowing where he was or whom he was with. And then – I hardly need to tell you this – when Chester died, she continued the financial help. I expect she will in the future."

"And all this happened by chance – your return here to Noère, your job at Best Chester, your friendship with Chester…."

There was silence. He had gone too far, and Claire's eyes flashed.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

Too far, although why she should hook on this detail, this doubt, rather than some other, he could not say. He mumbled something about believing a great deal. He could not forget that she had always given him truth, but never the whole truth. Claire told Miniver she preferred to walk back to the village with Alexis, alone.

*

Miniver had been trying to reach Claire for days. Over the weeks since he had met her, he had grown far more attached to her than he would have thought wise, had he thought at all. Now he wanted to see her again because there were still questions that could not be avoided. Even if he were willing to drop them all, someone else would ask them in his place. And he wanted to repair the damage. He missed her.

But nothing worked – neither phone calls nor emails nor even a drive out to her ugly pre-fabricated house on the outer edge of Noère. No one answered the battered doorbell.

At Best Chester he was told that she was on leave. The printer who employed Mary Fleet told him nearly the same thing about his employee.

Miniver was inconsolable, so he consoled himself by spending more time with Jack. His old friend was usually with Josianne, which made a threesome of them, and the threesome was happy enough. Jack, no doubt sensing Miniver's sadness, was more than generous with the IBI expense account. Miniver was not insensitive to the gesture: happiness, he thought, could not perhaps be bought, but consolation could be rented.

Three waiters simultaneously lifted the silver bells from the plates. Josianne, Miniver and Jack were lost in an argument about the *foie gras* – how to serve it and how to translate it.

"I don't understand much about this force-fed goose liver stuff," said Jack. "I think I saw a movie once about how you torture geese or something and then rip out their livers. Really gross."

This provoked peals of noisy giggles in Josianne. Miniver protested that nobody actually forced them, properly speaking, and that the geese were perfectly happy, at least until it came time to rip their livers out.

"In any case," said Miniver, seizing an occasion to shock his old friend, "the important question is how to prepare it. I recommend it raw, room temperature – that's indispensable – with a bit of crushed pepper and rock salt, and a good sauternes, of course."

"You eat it *waw*?" said Josianne. She made a vague effort to tuck in her blouse. "Nobody eats *foie gras* waw. Not even ware. You know it should be pink in sea center, no more. You just say you like it waw to shock sea *Ricains*" – it was the slang French word for Americans – "and for to be more French zan sea French."

"Try it," said Miniver, "and you'll change your mind." Josianne tried it and almost did. Jack could not bring himself even to taste it.

"I almost forget," said Josianne. "A letter for you, arrived zis morning. Marked 'personal.'"

It was an old-fashioned letter, in a good square envelope. Miniver recognized Claire's handwriting. Suddenly unconscious of his surroundings, he put the letter into the inner breast pocket of his suit-coat.

*

"Dear Miniver,

"Forgive me. I ran away – distressed with all your questions, it's true, and maybe for other reasons as well. No doubt for other reasons. Mum and I have decided to remain here in England for this time. We have, as you know, a certain financial independence now, which we did not have before, and we think it better to put behind us a lot of what's happened recently.

"I know I owe you explanations – for professional reasons or for personal ones, as you like. In my head they're mixed. I started to explain to you the last time I saw you – in fact I'd started some time before. I want to explain.

"From the age of ten, I grew up with hatred. I knew, I perfectly well knew, what had happened between Mum and Chester, even if I didn't know all the details. When Alexis was born I felt two things; I felt as if they were the only two things in my life. One was that I had to defend my family against the bad things that kept happening. The other was a very big love for Alexis, right from the start. I don't

know how to make you understand that, what I felt and what I feel, but I like to believe you do understand.

"Alexis always seemed to me more beautiful, and more fragile, and more to need defense than other children. I still think that. You know, I never told you this, but not only I was not Chester du Maine's mistress, I've never had a real boyfriend. Maybe I never will. I'm not sure why. Probably because Alexis and Mum need me instead. I don't have time for anything else, and perhaps I don't want anything else. I'm happy with them.

"But for a long time I felt a lot of hate. I believed that our family was hurt by outsiders. I wanted to protect us from the outsiders, and I wanted to punish them too. And the one I hated most was the one I had almost loved before. I hated Chester du Maine.

"I hated for fifteen years. For fifteen years I grew up in the knowledge that I would always protect my family, and that somehow I would punish the man who hurt my mother and who hurt my brother. These were almost the only things in my life – loving Mum and Alexis and hating Chester du Maine. I chose my studies for that, because I thought that somehow studying pharmacy might help me take the revenge that I was going to do.

"And they did help me. In my studies I learned of an experimental drug call plenylphanin P12, that was used on primates to stimulate heart failure. It was what I wanted: I wanted Chester du Maine to be a victim the way my Mum was a victim – I wanted Death by Pill. Even before I managed to meet Chester, I carried some of the capsules with me wherever I went. They made me feel good.

"So no, of course I didn't meet Chester du Maine by chance. I suppose you've always known that. I met him as I planned. I even seduced him, if "seduced" is the right word for just getting a man to ask you out. He wasn't very hard to seduce.

"He knew who I was, and I was surprised at first how nice he was to me, and how much interest he showed in Mum. It was clear he'd really cared for her. He didn't know about Alexis then. But even when Chester showed his good side, his generosity, his good easy nature, I never flinched, never hesitated, and never doubted. I knew not only what he'd done to Mum and Alexis, I knew that it was his irresponsibility and selfishness that did it, that did that to us, and that they had not changed. I kept the capsules ready.

"I kept them ready especially when he discovered about his son. That must have been the biggest shock of his life. To this day I don't know which part was greater – to know that he had a son, or to know that his son was handicapped. I don't even

know if at first he accepted either fact, though I think it reawakened his feeling with regard to Mum. He began asking more questions about her then. More questions about Alexis and her. And he began giving us money. All of that seemed good and normal to me, but it didn't change my intentions at all.

"The powder was tasteless. I emptied the capsules in a glass of champagne, which increased the speed of ingestion. They needed about ten hours to act. We dined together in his country house. No one else was present.

"We talked a lot, about Mum, about Alexis. I directed the conversation constantly to them, and I was relishing what was happening, though my heart was beating so hard and fast that I felt ill. I had planned all the details, and I wanted Chester to know everything before he died. I wanted this to be a poetic death. I wanted Chester to know he was going to Hell.

"And then, and then, something changed in me. The joy of my revenge just evaporated, suddenly it was gone, and I thought, 'I learned to love Alexis as he is, and now I'm learning to love Chester as he is.' And I thought, 'But Alexis had no choice,' but that didn't make any difference. Chester became just a poor son of a bitch like the rest of us. And so I told him everything.

"And now I didn't want Chester's death, and I felt horror for the idea that I could be its instrument. After fifteen years of hatred. I felt confused and stupid, and most of all I felt unhappy and sort of desperate. I told him I had, in my fashion, poisoned him, and I told him why, and he didn't say anything at all. He just stared at me.

"It would have been funny, or poetic at least, if he'd been able to vomit up the drug, but it was too late for that – hours too late. I wanted him to go to hospital immediately, though I had no idea what antidote or treatment was possible. No antidote had ever been tried.

"He was very strange. For a long time after I told him, he was stupefied. He didn't say anything, he just stared. It looked a lot like he was thinking, even meditating, and for Chester that was unusual. But then, so were the circumstances. I guess if he was going to reflect a little sometime in his life, that was the time.

*"So he stayed silent for a long time, and he wouldn't listen to anything I was saying – not about taking him to hospital, not about anything. I even tried to pull him to his feet – there was nothing wrong with him physically, not yet – and he shouted at me. I remember, he spoke in French: '*Arrête!*' Then he began to cry. He made no sound. His face didn't even move. I'd never seen him cry before and I didn't like it.*

"It's funny, I still don't know exactly why he was crying. I mean, was it because someone he thought was his good friend had tried to kill him? Or was it because at last he realized what he'd done – to Mum, to Alexis, to me? I'd prefer it be the latter, but I don't know.

"I think I calmed down after that – I don't remember. I talked some more but I don't remember what about, except that it became clear to me that he wanted me to leave him there alone. And in the end, I did. I left him sitting there in his salon in the half dark, though I hear the lights were all off when they found him. I don't know when he died. Maybe he got up and turned off the lights. I left him sitting there and closed the door behind me. He wasn't crying any more, although I was."

*

The letter continued. Miniver had read this far without even lighting a cigar, without pouring something into a glass; since he had opened it he had scarcely moved.

He had come back to his office to read the letter in private, slowly and carefully, as he knew it would have to be read. Now he put the last page aside for a long while and stared out his unopenable office windows, down at the silent summer night traffic of Paris.

When he picked the page up again, some time later, the cigar and the cognac were back but his head was still swimming.

"I've told you the whole truth now, Miniver, at last. I think you'll believe me. I've written it to you knowing what you could do with a written declaration, an admission, knowing what the consequences could be to me, and to my mother and my brother. This is my confession. You will do with it what you think best. I have put myself in your hands.

"I don't know that I'm sorry Chester's dead. I miss him sometimes. We had become friends in a way, but his death seems appropriate to me, and not unjust. I don't even know what my own responsibility finally was. Did I kill him?

"God forgive me for whatever I've done.

"Yours sincerely,

"Claire Fleet"

Although Claire had opened the letter using Miniver's first name, she had signed it with her full name, as if she wanted to be sure that the letter could be official.

Miniver put it into his pocket and walked, limping, leaning more and more heavily on his silver-headed cane, the entire distance from his office to his apartment in the center of Paris.

*

"Jeez, Miniver, how can you smoke those things in the morning? At least you could wait till lunch. One of these days you're gonna see what a disgusting habit it is. Look at your ashtray! It's filthy. Everything else in your office is clean, artistic, pure. Why do ya stink everything up?"

There was some of the usual banter in Jack's voice, but there was another, new tone. Jack had come to say goodbye after the failure of Miniver's mission.

Failure was perhaps the wrong term. IBI had already paid him in full – paid Miniver for declaring that there was no reason to believe that Chester du Maine had not died of an ordinary heart attack. Unfortunately, Jack did not believe Miniver.

The ashtray was of course Josianne's, who had been smoking more than ever. She was in the outer rooms, trying to find a lost button that had popped off into less concentrated space. Her eyes were red. She looked even less attractive than usual. Even Mme. Lacrone's eyes were weepy: she was an affectionate old soul and Jack was easy to like.

Gérard was in a tither. He had brought Jack a large pink box of delicate French pastries to take home to his family – pastries, he reasoned, do not have time to go stale on the Concorde. But then he had set them on the floor and subsequently stepped on the box. He was now simultaneously trying to keep the *crème pâtissière* from staining the Russian carpet, and wondering whether he had time to limp out and buy more pastries.

Old-fashioned Americans do not hug each other, especially when they are both men, and especially when one of them is as fat as Miniver. The two men shook hands, and in each pair of eyes there was genuine regret at leaving an old friend, a sense of relief, and knowledge that something was no longer as it had been between them. They looked at each other briefly, then looked away. And Jack was gone.

*

Somewhere in the months that followed Jack's departure, Miniver received a second letter from Claire, thanking him for the cello. He had written to her to say that he had destroyed her letter – he had not even wanted to take the risk of returning it to her. He was not surprised that she wrote – with sincere, even profound thanks and apologies, it is true – to confirm that she and her family had decided to "break with

the past" and remain in England. He understood that she meant that he would not hear from her again, and he never did. He did not answer her letter.

There were times when it seemed to him Claire Fleet was not only one of the most brilliant people he had ever met, but that she was also extraordinarily capable, in her undoubted goodness, of leading people precisely where she wanted them to be.

Never, never, his instinct unerring or erring, did it occur to Miniver that her story was not utterly true.

*

Although they stayed in touch, Miniver's friendship with Jack was not ever again the same. Their contacts grew less frequent, and Miniver did not work for IBI again.

He went back to see Helena du Maine on a growing number of occasions. They never had what the French called *une conversation intime*, but each seemed to admire the other, more or less, and to appreciate the other's company. Now that they had no occasion for conflict he saw less steel in her eyes.

Alexis Fleet being "of father unknown," Helena had of course received full payment from IBI. Best Chester was flourishing, and so, Miniver imagined, were the Fleets.

One day, *chez* Helena, years later, Miniver was watching this elegant, distant woman who had, over the ensuing years, almost become his friend. She stood at the window of her apartment, looking down at the trees in the park below.

Miniver was drinking cognac, but he was not smoking. The sun highlighted the aura of Helena's now slightly graying hair. Without turning, she said to him, "Claire Fleet is married. She has a child. I believe she is happy."

THE COUNTRY
The Tale of an Old French House

June 29, 11.30 pm

The night was full of trees and early summer. A very large man dressed in the old-fashioned black clothes of a Roman Catholic priest was driving a decrepit utility vehicle, bumping his way down a winding half-country, half-forest road – some would have called it a dirt trail. Inspired, perhaps, by the season and the weather, he was roaring out a song which never shocked people who did not understand Latin.

In this, and in his physique, the priest could have been mistaken for a contemporary Rasputin: he was enormous, loud and, in spite of advancing middle age, intensely black-bearded. Even without the Latin, the Roman collar and the tsarist illusion, many a man would have been taken aback by so imposing a creature.

Although the priest had often followed this road on previous occasions, he paid careful attention to the worn, painted signs that were his only guides to the proper turnings: left for Harwood House, right for *les Valois*, the hunting and country residence of the baron de Toulon.

There was nothing else human around: fields of man-high corn; sunflowers glowing in moonlight; half a dozen wild boar, surprisingly silent and agile; a few roedeer; a fox barking. Once this same large man in black, thinking he knew the way, had not paid attention to the signs and had been startled by savage dogs, guarding the baron's empty estate.

June 30, 1 pm

However romantically spooky huge old gothic Harwood House might have looked in the moonlight of the night before, its ramshackle roofs, odd towers and elegant gardens promised good cheer and friendship in the summer sunlight.

Miniver Lafritte poured himself another glass of *manzanilla* and sank ever more deeply and happily into his Chesterfield armchair. He felt a little guilty starting his *apéritif* before the others, but not enough to wait; Miniver Lafritte was an enthusiastic and impatient man.

He was furtively watching his wife, however, with what looked like patience indeed. A pretty blonde woman almost as tall as her husband and a great deal slimmer, she was moving attentively about her *salon* and *salle à manger*, preparing, giving orders, her alert and birdlike eye on flowers and tables. She moved a crystal vase of yellow roses and told her husband to bring in more chairs. At that moment their eldest son Ben entered the room and Miniver told him to bring the chairs. Miniver settled back into his Chesterfield and resumed wife-watching; his heart was beating hard.

The fat man continued to watch the lady, out of the corner of his eye or when she looked away, though it is unlikely that anyone as perceptive as Alix Lafritte would not have been well aware of everyone and everything around her. After a quarter-century of marriage Miniver still had a schoolboy's diffident crush on this charming person, which no doubt was why he had at last given up looking for, finding and marrying new wives.

"What would you like to drink, my dear?"

Alix adjusted the white linen napkins. "I don't know. You choose."

"A glass of sherry, perhaps?" Miniver looked directly at her.

She aligned a chair. "I'll have a glass of whisky." Her husband duly prepared it with the ice cube the lady always liked, and which the husband always, silently and lovingly, disapproved.

Taking the squat glass, even the lady's hands inspired her husband, though they were hardly those of a fairy-tale princess. Mme. Lafritte lost literally no time in cooking or laundry, and her fingernails were impeccably clean and trim, but deep in her skin there was always some hint of the ground-in earth of the perpetual gardener. Looking away so as not to meet his wife's gaze, Miniver refilled his own small crystal glass with sherry and reflected that vaguely grimy hands could be lovely.

Ben went back to the music room to turn pages for his sister at the piano, and in this Miniver, although he did not need them, found yet more reasons to dote on his country wife. There were in fact seven of these reasons, but they were not all present.

Isabel Lafritte was playing Diabelli and singing. Her eyes, like her brother's, were fixed in exclusive attention to the score. The music, though relatively simple, was played, thought Miniver, with that same delicacy Isabel herself embodied physically: her fine hands, unstained by gardening, moved lightly over the black and white keys, and her bright eyes never glanced at them.

The blond heads of brother and sister reminded Miniver of the centuries of blond heads in Alix's family, and he was moved again. When the piece was finished, brother and sister smiled. Ben's face was as sculpted and muscular as his sister's was not. Isabel wore her hair in a long braid that reached her waist.

"How*ever* can you dress that way, Isabel?" If there was a trace of the summary or of the harsh in the mother's words, it was too subtle to be registered by the husband.

"Surely you don't intend to come to table like that?" Alix's rhetorical question, in French as usual, was followed by the silence that was its logical sequel. Even Miniver was now intimidated, though he would neither have admitted nor recognized it. Maneuvering deftly, Isabel rose in silence and left the room. It was true that she had a twelve-year-old's enthusiasm for the *ordinaire* and the more or less harmlessly vulgar.

The French garden doors crashed open. A mountainous black-bearded person filled their double frames, with a small boy on either side forming a kind of human triptych, and all of them singing:

Haut les mains !
Peau de lapin !
La maîtresse en maillot de bain !

Seizing a whisky glass, the huge priest poured himself a huge draft of sherry, breaking at one swoop at least three rules of French etiquette. The smaller boy, Henri, stayed constantly at his uncle's side and watched him with smiling eyes – grinning eyes, if eyes can grin. The slightly older brother, Bernard, also watched this giant uncle, but from a distance, and his eyes were solemn.

Uncle Alexander was so big that he won the ultimate Lafritte family *concours:* he looked even bigger than his little brother Miniver, though horizontally the question would have been decided otherwise.

Alexander had managed both to sing at the top of his booming voice and also to hear what was going on elsewhere. "With a voice like that inside her, my dear *belle-sœur*, God won't care about the wrapping."

"Henri," said Miniver to his son, "you mustn't stick so close to your uncle that his drinking elbow is hampered."

Alix was passing through the room with more yellow roses and a silver bowl. "Henri doesn't have time enough with his uncle. He is doing no harm." She spoke in her careful British English this time, with a ghost of accent and a trace of foreign structure. Miniver's heart took off again.

As suddenly as little Henri had appeared, he was gone – like a miniature version of his uncle. Ben returned and sat down so close to a young lady that one assumed, or hoped, that she was his and he was hers, which was in fact the case.

Isabel, still defiant in tennis-shoes, jeans and a mismatched and misspelled tee-shirt, sat down at her father's ample side. Properly spaced around him, there would have been room for most of the other children as well. Miniver was uxoriously and paternally radiant.

"You played," he said, "the Diabelli piece very finely. It's good music." He reflected with sadness that his pretty daughter was as delicate as the piece she played, and a good deal more fragile.

"Oh, I don't know," said Alix. "I find it rather *banal*."

A tall, old, almost ancient man appeared and filled glasses with more sherry: Miniver's and Alexander's were already empty. Alix's whisky glass was still almost full, and the others were drinking fruit juice. The old man had only one arm, and moved with stiff grace.

"Martin," said Miniver, "it's time to bring up another bottle from the cellar – the temperature will be perfect."

The amputated old man bowed slightly in deferential silence and left the room, which continued to hum with conversation, broken from time to time by gales of the laughter of the two brothers finding something especially funny, or simply full of the joy of being together.

A beautiful, long-haired German shepherd, spread like a rug under the piano, flattened her ears and began to growl. Although a bitch, she was – canine proportions considered – as unusually big as the priest. A six or seven-year-old boy,

dressed like Isabel and apparently as frail, though in fact a great deal more robust, came into the room and knocked over a chair. He was chewing gum with his mouth open and tracking mud into the *salon*, although the ground outside was dry.

"Dickie," said Miniver, "lunch will be served shortly. Perhaps you should stop chewing gum." The boy was about to stick his gum under the nearest table when he was checked by simultaneous cries from two or three different directions.

It was Alexander's turn to speak. "After lunch, Dickie – or before if you prefer – you might enjoy going out into the forest and playing with some of your Uncle Miniver's World War II collection grenades."

Little Dickie's eyes lit up with enthusiasm, and Miniver's with disappointment. "Alexander, they've all been defused."

Alexander looked crestfallen. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Dickie tracked his tracks back out to the garden, the gum back in his mouth. There were shrieks of fraternal laughter. The huge priest mumbled something about people on their way to Hell. The dog stopped growling.

Miniver seized his layman's chance: "Dickie is one of God's children too, *Monsieur l'abbé*. I shouldn't have to say that to you, of all people. Sometimes the unpromising ones turn out well. I've personally known rotten kids who turned into admirable adults. I remember a big brother who once was rather petty, rather mean, some said even a bit cruel – that is, before he became holy, and perfect."

It was hard to tell whether the priest's silence was due to a correction humbly, or at least duly, taken, or whether he was simply not listening, since almost immediately after these words the dog began to growl again and Dickie ran back into the room, knocking over Miniver's favorite crystal ashtray and the cigar remains therein.

Miniver stopped thinking of hope and potential. Old Martin gravely announced that madame was served.

*

The great priest spoke a loud and jolly blessing and the ladies were served in careful order. Miniver often reflected that the names "Mother Nora" and "Mother Bee" made the two grandmothers sound like a comedy team, and that this was especially unfortunate because it was plausible. Mother Bee was just then rolling her eyes and saying sarcastically to Martin that she had asked for only a little consommé, the implication, clear as the consommé, being that the quantity in her bowl could not be

called a little. The impassive Martin took some liquid back with the silver ladle, but this appeared only to exacerbate the situation in the old lady's eyes.

Mother Nora, who had not yet been served – one was always careful to defer to Mother Bee – smiled, looked into empty space, and said "thank you" several times. She seemed very happy.

Given the wages of eroding age – in these two cases, of advanced eroding age – or perhaps because of a simple lack of resemblance – it would have been difficult for an outsider to say which grandmother at the long oak table belonged to whom.

Full of family, Miniver beamed. "Martin asked Cosette to start with consommé just for you, Alexander, because you like meals done the old way. And a cold consommé on a hot summer's day is a perfect companion to a wonderful sherry."

"Oh, I don't know," said Alix. "Some customs are more honored in the breech than the observance."

Poor Miniver was impressed, as always, with his wife's knowledge of English literature; it was one of the many things they had in common.

"Well, *I* know," said the priest, "and I honor the custom. Martin, please, more sherry." The one-armed man, chagrined to have been caught out with an empty glass in his care – even as rapid a glass as that of the *abbé* Lafritte – moved quickly to his duty. Alix mentioned something about the incorrectness of serving consommé in English-style bowls, instead of French consommé cups, with handles.

Miniver smiled; he had long ago learned to love from distance. The phone rang and Martin, as usual, and in spite of repeated orders, answered it. He came back, as gravely as always, to the *salle à manger*. "An urgent telephone communication for Monsieur." Martin's French was as impeccable as his clothes, and as out-of-date. Miniver forewent recrimination and excused himself.

*

He returned as if nothing had happened; in any case no one, except the bird-eyed mistress of Harwood House, noticed anything unusual, and not even she was aware that her husband had returned to the table with a concealed firearm.

If Miniver was a little more subdued than he had been, Alexander was ever more expansive.

"Is it true," he boomed, "that little Henri's going to be a *torero*?"

"*Mon Dieu*," said his mother. "I can only hope not."

"And why not? He has to die sometime. Dying in sun and courage and beauty is a better way than most."

"Or in blood and stupidity," said Alix. "If Henri wants to fight bulls, it's because you and Miniver take him to the *ferias*. Don't pray, Alex, for that."

"Maybe," said Henri, "I'll be a priest."

"Oh, God," said Mother Bee. Old Mother Nora said nothing, and smiled.

Isabel chimed in with her pretty voice. "I think he's going to be a pianist, like me." She looked even paler than usual in her blue summer dress. Her teenage clothes had not, after all, survived her mother's call to lunch.

Martin served *sole à la meunière* and poured chablis into the white wine glasses. The priest explained to young Bernard that he was never to use a knife with fish, fish knife though there may be at the side of his plate. Alix thought this was Anglo-Saxon nonsense, but the boy listened gravely to his uncle and did not touch the utensil.

Martin appeared with two braised guinea-fowl on a large platter. Still-new, glazed Brussels sprouts and turnips bordered the unlucky animals. The wine changed to chateau cantemerle, which Ben thought was damaged by the Brussels sprouts. Miniver suspected his son was trying to impress Jeanne, who had, in keeping with kind and traditional usage, been seated next to her *fiancé*. Jeanne looked at Ben with intense affection, but she did not seem impressed. Miniver, however, was.

The chateau cantemerle stayed through the ribs of beef and sauce béarnaise, although by now the only surviving appetites belonged to the two big older men and Mother Nora, who appeared to forget everything she ate as soon as she ate it, and so to live in a state of perpetual hunger. The men, however, would atone for the size of their appetites by taking almost none of the salad that followed.

"It's part of my personal ecosystem," said Miniver, declining the red and green leaves. "Rabbits eat lettuce, and I eat rabbits."

"You can't drink wine with a salad," said Alexander, laughing; "especially not one all soaked in vinaigrette dressing, so what's the point? Of course, one might make an exception if it were full of *lardons*, or walnuts, or cheese." Perhaps suddenly aware that he was not being courteous, or even correct, Alexander stopped speaking and busied himself with his glass.

Alix, who was not easily threatened, simply ignored the *impolitesse*, and told her younger, squirming children, by the look in her eye, that there was no hope of permission to leave the table early.

The small children found what consolation they could in the joyful banter between their father and their uncle, and then found it again in a favorite dessert, a *crème brûlée*, which delighted everyone except little Cousin Dickie, who had eaten almost nothing throughout the entire revolting meal.

It was Miniver who took it upon himself to release the children when everyone moved to the salon for coffee. Then, when the golden moment of cigars and cognac had come, he released, or excused, all the men, and retired with them to the library. There the priest drank as much cognac as his brother, surprisingly, drank little, and told stories that made everyone laugh.

*

The rest of the day passed quietly. Isabel played Mozart sonatas, looking but not sounding frail at the old Érard concert grand piano, too big for the music room it was nonetheless in; the instrument was perhaps too big for any room in the house, though not for the huge cellars below, where it might have been placed. The child seemed dwarfed by the giant instrument, but she made it sing.

The boys, all of whom had been or were in choirs, sang Schubert. Bernard in particular sang sweetly and well, in a beautifully modulated, small voice. Alix asked for her favorite *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, and walked out of the room later, when they sang the *Ave Maria*, which she found sentimental, and detested. The German shepherd stayed near her beloved Isabel, as if she feared for the girl's future; the dog lay flat under the piano, as solemn as little Bernard.

*

When the day began to cool the adults went for a long walk. Alix was rarely at her husband's side, but each visit Miniver made to these gardens, every view he ever had of them, made him sparkle with love for her.

The gardens, in the English rather than the French style, were not magnificent but, like their mistress, full of charm and color and life. There were almost two acres of them, bordered on one side by the sprawling old house and on three sides by the immense forest – walks full of every hue and variety of rose, of hollyhock, of chamomile, of gillyflowers, *ruines-de-Rome* and flame-colored lichen and fern and moss on old stone walls, of grapevine, of summer purple and red and gold and green and white, of parsley and mint and bay and pale blue-flowering thyme.

Mother Bee, vigorous for her age, was complaining that the others were walking too slowly. Mother Nora had indeed some time ago stopped walking altogether. She was seated, smiling, on an old stone bench under a huge misshapen plane tree that seemed to be melting under its own weight, a kind of wild wooden version of its proprietor.

In the far corner of the gardens the cherry, pear and apple trees held no memory of the blossoms of early spring; they were as unconscious of where they were as Nora was. The apples were already growing large and round but not yet red. The old woman took a poppy in her hand.

"Isn't this a lovely thing?" she said.

"Oh, God." Mother Bee frowned and walked away.

Miniver was walking hand in hand with Isabel and little Henri. They stopped to examine a butterfly, black and orange and white, its delicate wings pumping. This place was Miniver's earthly paradise, and during the week he was banished from it. Bright summer lunches here were his perfect happiness. Most of all, it was here that he saw his beloved as an ideal human being.

*

Sometime in the afternoon Ben had disappeared, and his father knew that he had returned to his computer programming. He called him back to play the harpsichord – the very instrument Miniver thought perfect for Isabel, and which she refused to touch. With great skill for a computer expert, Ben played parts of *Die Kunst der Fuge* while people came in and out and the big brothers smoked large cigars and laughed. Little Dickie was, to the general satisfaction, nowhere to be seen, though he had received no grenades. Isabel was back in tennis shoes and her misspelled tee-shirt.

At the end of one of the pieces, Miniver leapt to his feet with an agility that often surprised people who did not know him well. "Let me see the score, Benedict. Here – from 45 on ... up to ... at least here. Pay attention to the base triplets. They're not eighth notes. Concentrate."

To a close observer, Ben would have appeared to be concentrating rather more upon gratuitous or at least unwelcome paternal advice. But he smiled feebly and played the passage again, more or less the way his father wished. Miniver had the good sense not to insist.

"Ah! Much better! Thank you."

Alix liked it better before.

Miniver spent most of his time in Paris – all the week and even certain weekends. He sometimes imported a child or two.

*

Martin was not the old man's first name but his last – most people could not even have recalled the first name, and no one would have dared use it to his face. Until his official retirement, he had for many years been the *ordonnance*, or orderly, of one of France's best-known generals. He had lost his arm during his military service, though no one knew how, or if he had lost it in battle. On the other hand, everyone knew that, after years of hullabaloo as the *maître d'hôtel* of an important military and in fact diplomatic residence, gaunt Martin loved the simpler and perhaps more courteous work he found *chez les Lafritte.*

Miniver loved not only Martin's impeccable, old-fashioned service but also his reserve and his superb French: as the children of one French and one American parent, he and Alexander naturally sought to speak both languages with what the French call *excellence*, and they generally managed better than most natives of either language, if on occasion with odd results. Martin helped keep Miniver's French in form.

Alix was fond of old Martin, but even fonder of his rustic, passive, youngish wife. Cosette spoke French miserably, and no English at all. She was ignorant and heartily stupid, with that undoubting self-sufficiency of people who do not recognize, or perceive, much beyond themselves. But the continual toothy grin on her face announced her heart of gold, she was hard-working, and she was a wonderful cook.

She had, in fact, a single perception, which was that of other people's apparent moods, and one desire, which was that those moods be happy, even if she rarely understood them. The only ways she knew to make them happy were to be cheerful and to cook. She did both with enthusiasm, knowing the cure if not the cause.

Everyone in the house loved her, with the exception of temporary little Dickie, who preferred industrial potato chips, noodles and ketchup. Thanks to Cosette, Alix was free to give herself to the three things that mattered to her: her children, her family genealogy, and her garden.

Cosette's cooking was quintessentially French. Her kitchen looked like a cross between a compost-heap and a biological weapons factory. She kept unopened cans in the tiny, leaky, tepid refrigerator, which she rarely cleaned, and left the lettuce on the windowsill. She had probably never read a recipe in her life – no one was sure

she could read – and certainly she never measured anything. She just knew how to cook.

She threw eggs, flour and butter together and made a delicious pie in what seemed like minutes. She whipped oil and egg yolk into perfect mayonnaise with a fork while she rehearsed the local gossip. She made a perfect sauce for a *poule au riz* without knowing how she did it. Everything she used was fresh – she just threw out the old windowsill lettuce. And she did all of this with love, and so she was loved.

*

Isabel and the three young boys were surprised to be sent off to bed so early; they protested doubly because of the presence of their magic priest uncle. He promised that if they obeyed Cosette, who, good-hearted as she was, was far too authoritative to need help in putting them to bed, then he would tell them a terrifying tale from the Brothers Grimm. The four children raced upstairs.

In the meantime the Franco-American brothers sat and drank bas-armagnac and talked with that species of joy one finds only in the *retrouvailles* of family or old friends.

"Ben," said Miniver, "has a job this Fall, doing research in artificial intelligence. It'll be good for him. The only work he has now is looking after Toulon's house. You don't need six years of university for that."

Alexander observed that his brother was pouring unusual, niggardly quantities of brandy. "I've never met the baron, you know. What's he like?"

"Toulon? You're not likely to meet him, and more's the pity. He's a good friend, an amazing hunter, drinks a bit too much, knows French and even English literature better than we do. Well, the French, at least. He's one of the most pleasant, intelligent, learned companions I've ever had. But he thinks there's some sort of curse on his place here, and he mostly keeps away from it – he has others. It'd be more practical if you to wanted to visit the estate – *les Valois*. That's still here."

"What's the curse?"

Miniver passed the humidor to his brother. "I don't know really. Goes back more than two centuries, I think – one of Toulon's ancestors appears to have committed a mysterious, heinous crime, and his victim pronounced a curse on him – or on the whole family, present and future generations – or on the whole village, since the mysterious ancestor doesn't seem to have acted alone. Some even say the curse was put on the house itself – not just in the sense of the future descendants but also the physical house, the *domaine des Valois*.

"That part of the legend's apparently not true: of the two manors and all the old village houses that used to be up here in the forest when it wasn't forest, but a clearing, all that's left is this reconstructed place – and the old Toulon estate. In the end, maybe it's *les Valois* that has survived all the others."

Alexander had chosen his corona and was now delighted to see the end glowing in perfect symmetry. "You know nothing of the crime, nothing more of the curse?"

"Not much. Toulon doesn't talk about it – at least he never has to me. I think he believes the old stories, or half believes them. In any case he wouldn't want to publicize a criminal ancestor. In America, I think, the whole thing would be turned into a joke – or to derision. But it was in America that Hawthorne wrote of something similar: *God will give you blood to drink*."

The priest, unsmiling, drew on his cigar and mused at the recollection. "And the house?"

"A magic place. I'll take you to visit it. Hundreds of years older than this Victorian shambles. You already know that my house is built on the cellars of the old Harwood manor. Toulon's house is the other place – the one that never burned. *Les Valois* is now the only other dwelling-place around."

Miniver emptied the last of the bas-armagnac into the two snifters. Alexander leaned forward for the bell to ring for Martin, but Miniver said he would bring the bottle himself. Martin was nowhere to be seen.

Miniver came back with the dusty bottle but did not, to Alexander's distress, open it immediately. "All you hear nowadays – all maybe anybody ever heard – is rumor, needless to say. Some people say the curse is still in the manor – that the house itself will take revenge. I imagine it's taken revenge on innocent me, depriving me of a fine neighbor – my only neighbor."

But the aging priest was hardly listening. He was concentrating impatiently on his empty glass.

*

The terrors of the Brothers Grimm had been recounted and surmounted, the children were asleep, and Harwood House was quiet. Miniver called all the adults, except the two old ladies, into the study, though Martin remained absent. Mother Nora had been sacrificed to Mother Bee, in part on the correct assumption that Nora would not mind. Everyone sensed, of course, that something important was in the air.

"It's best," said Miniver, "in cases like this, to be expeditious: I think there's not a great deal to fear, but you all must be told that I received word at lunchtime today that a certain Cecil Lefevre escaped, just before dawn this morning, by helicopter from his prison in Fleury-Mérogis, where he was awaiting transfer to the penitentiary in Poissy."

No one spoke, in part because everyone knew Miniver had not finished, in part because no one had ever heard of Cecil Lefevre.

"Cecil Lefevre is a bad man – he's stupid, utterly ignorant, savage and cruel. He was to begin serving a long sentence, some twenty years if I remember, for a variety of unpleasant acts, the details of which I'll spare you. I was instrumental in his capture and conviction, and the police think – correctly, I believe – that he'll be coming to see me; in prison he often said he would." As he spoke, Miniver found himself looking at his wife.

She paled. "I knew there was something. And you've said nothing all afternoon?"

"I said nothing because I needed a little time to think, and because I wanted the children in bed."

"And what," said Alix, "if this person had come this afternoon – or now?"

"Martin is at this moment with the children, and he is armed. And I know this man – in the newspapers he was called Cecil the Hun, and you might have heard of him under that name; I know him pretty well. I know how he acts and how he, shall we say for want of a better word, how he thinks. He won't come right away."

Alix looked not at all reassured. Jeanne was whispering to Ben that she had indeed heard of Cecil the Hun, but had not known that her fiancé's father had anything to do with him.

Miniver continued. "The police have been here in number since a few minutes after the call. Marie Liège, whom you all know, I think, except perhaps Jeanne – Captain Liège has had her *gendarmes* deployed in and around the forest all afternoon."

It had been for some moments apparent that Father Alexander was fascinated by what he was hearing. Now he spoke.

"They'll just scare him off – and anyway, a good criminal doesn't usually have much trouble avoiding posted *gendarmes*."

Whether because this was his family and his house, or because this was more or less his *métier*, *gentil* Miniver was picking up authority rapidly.

"No, Alexander. For a start – I thought you already knew this – Marie is a first-rate cop. I've already discussed the entire deployment with her. She has plainclothes people in secure radio contact, never more than one visible from any one place, in the fields at the road entrance and scattered through the forest. All the vehicles are hidden. Even if there were a second car holding off, its occupants wouldn't see what happened to the first.

"Equally important – and none of you could know this – Cecil the Hun is an inept criminal. He's so terribly violent that it works very much against him. But he isn't impulsive: he likes to brood and plan and savor in advance, which is one of the reasons I don't expect him now. He is perhaps insane, which is already to my advantage, and he has the intelligence of a cabbage."

The priest was thinking of famous last words: he did not like this summary dismissal of an enemy, and he wondered how a cabbage had managed to escape from a prison like Fleury-Mérogis. He was also thinking that a first car in radio contact with a second could easily send an alert; that too would be less complicated than helicopters. But Alexander deferred to the master of the house and said something other.

"Fleury-Mérogis. The mass prison, the biggest in Europe. People call it the Prison Without a Soul, though I didn't know prisons had souls."

Miniver looked at his brother, not sure of what he meant. "Well, there were four thousand souls in it – or three thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine, Cecil's being debatable. And, from what I've heard, only two showers, which Cecil won't have minded."

Alexander corrected sacerdotally. "Let's say four thousand, even if they're all dirty."

Alix's voice trembled just a little. "Cabbage or no cabbage, I don't like this at all. We should leave immediately – go somewhere we'll be in security until the *gendarmerie* has done its work and caught this man." It was exceptional to hear her speak imperfect English: the French influence was stronger than usual, or the English structure was weaker.

Although the priest's doubts had not been spoken, they could nonetheless be found in his brother's head. Everything Miniver had said was true, but he was more worried about Cecil than he let appear.

He was also worried about money, which was power, which was what you did not want your enemy to have. Helicopter prison escapes were not unknown in France, and they did not require special intelligence, but Miniver could not stop wondering where in the world someone like Cecil the Hun could have found the necessary cash. Thus there existed already a resource Miniver would not have expected Cecil to have – and the worst construction to put on it all would be the presence of an unknown, more formidable accomplice.

Alix was still waiting for her husband's response to her words. It came with more firmness than she liked.

"You may be right, my dear, but that's not quite what I've decided. Not all *gendarmes* are as clever as Marie, and not even Marie can devote all her time to us. Cecil will wait, will choose his moment like the *braconnier* he is. Perhaps the *gendarmes* will catch him. If they don't – and I think they won't – Cecil will find me sooner or later. When he does, I'd like the encounter to be on my ground, and I'd like to be prepared."

He paused, to find his words, or for effect. He took a cigar from the humidor, but did not look at it and did not light it.

"All of the ladies and children must leave – for somewhere safe that you and I can determine this evening." Apparently he was still speaking to Alix, although he was no longer looking at her. "And you must all leave as soon as possible – within days, or hours."

Alix was the first to rise and leave the room.

*

Miniver and Jeanne took a long evening walk in the gardens. The young lady seemed to practice half the sports known to humanity, managing to be athletic and feminine at the same time. Miniver found it pleasant to look at her.

The still-late sunset colors of salmon and crimson and bright pink seemed appropriate for a time of murder, or intended murder. White roses glowed in the dusk. Miniver was not smoking.

Both the fat, aging man and the young future daughter-in-law knew the reason for which they were taking this *promenade*, but for a long time, and perhaps for the simple pleasure of it, they spoke of other things: of the bats flitting in the flowery dusk, of the enthusiasm of *Monsieur l'abbé* for his niece and nephews, of Marie.

"Oddly enough, I first met Marie – Captain Liège, or *adjutant-chef* Liège as she was at the time – we all first met her at one of Alexander's Latin Masses at Saint-Damien in Paris. You know that he's been fighting for years to stay within the old-fashioned part of the New Improved Catholic Church – which is to say, he's trying not to leave the Church and join Monseigneur Lefebvre's noble counter-revolutionaries. That's never been easy for him, and one of the things I admire in him is his resolution."

Miniver paused, then returned to the subject. "Marie's a strange Catholic: I don't think her piety goes deep, but wherever it goes it's the old Latin faith. We met in a place we have in common." He snapped off a white rose, but in spite of its color he did not find the courage to hand it to Jeanne.

"So we met at Mass. And since we're in related professions – Marie and I, I mean – well, it's not surprising that over the years she's often been a great help to me, as from time to time I have been to her. I had something to do with her recent promotion. Much more practically, she once more or less saved me from getting shot. I'll tell you the story sometime."

Jeanne had a kind of plain prettiness about her that promised to last a lifetime. More to the point, Miniver thought she was full of lucidity and competence. He handed her the white rose.

"You know, monsieur," she said at last – this was France and first names were still often avoided, especially with superiors in age or rank – "you know, I think, what I want to ask."

Miniver said nothing. She took out a cigarette, and he asked her not to light it. "It's already time," he said, "for basic precaution."

She put the cigarette away. "I want you to let me stay here with the rest of you. It's not – it's not just – to be with Ben. I'm fit, I'm cool in action, and I'm not stupid. I can be useful. You'll be better off with me here than you would be with one person fewer, and I trust" – here she was trying to make light of a subject she felt too earnestly about – "I trust you aren't making any decisions based on masculine bravado."

Miniver took the sop with gratitude. "Not very much, Jeanne." He smiled. "Not much."

Now it was he who wished he could smoke. He knew everything she was saying was irrefutable, and he felt with sad certainty that there was no possibility of granting her request. And he knew that she would submit to his refusal with grace.

"I don't know how to explain this, Jeanne. I know what you say is true. You would add to whatever force we'll be able to muster here – just as Marie already has done." He was grasping for words and phrases.

He paused a long time, during which she said nothing. "I come from a distant generation, Jeanne – a simpler one, maybe, or maybe more complex; in any case a different one. I can't accept, I can't act, I can't function as I might need to around a wounded woman the way I can with a wounded man."

Again he left a long silence which she did not touch.

"And then maybe I don't have the courage to make an exception. But this is a time when I need to feel completely sure of what I'm doing."

He had not finished trying to explain when Jeanne put a merciful hand on his arm. "I can't pretend that I agree, monsieur, but I do understand. Truly. And I'll speak of it no more."

They walked a good deal longer in the darkening gardens, and in perfect silence. When they reached the house, Miniver kissed the girl once on the cheek.

"Thank you," he said. "It's going to be an honor to have you in this family."

*

The rest of the evening was strained. Miniver had already ordered his Paris team to be at the house early the next morning, and this prevented active planning or preparation in the meantime. And there was dissension in the air. Everyone was seeking artificial subjects of conversation.

"You know, I bought this place a long time ago."

It was impossible to know whether Miniver was speaking to his brother or to Ben. The older men were smoking cigars over a tall silver pot; at least the priest now knew why they were drinking coffee, and in fact he did not disagree. Ben was neither smoking nor drinking.

"Funny thing. Even for the wreck and ruin it was, the price was very low. Perhaps the local superstitions had something to do with it. The whole village used to be up here, around the manors, and now it's moved miles away."

The words were neither discourse nor conversation, but a kind of ramble. "Some people still think the Toulon *malédiction* applied to everything and everyone around here – including this house, which was abandoned when I bought it. A house built in

the nineteenth century doesn't have the character of a place like *les Valois*, but it's more livable, with its big rooms and high ceilings and its *disposition architecturale bourgeoise*."

He poured more coffee, and seemed after all to be talking to himself. Alexander and Ben watched him and listened in silence.

"Alix and I gave a lot of money and love and work to Harwood House. When we bought it, the trees were already here – the plane tree must be two hundred years old – but there was no garden at all. I work in Paris, I love Paris, and my marriage has not, I know, always been what it might have been. But my heart is here. So maybe, just maybe, I'm staying here in part to protect the house."

July 1, 11.15 am

Miniver's Paris team climbed out of the battered Mercedes station wagon in a holiday mood, and this was not as incongruous as it might seem. In the first place, Miniver had felt obliged, for security reasons, to close the Paris office until the whole *affaire* was over, and so an unexpected holiday was literally in the offing. In addition, although they saw each other only occasionally, almost all the people assembled genuinely liked each other, with the exceptions of Jeanne and Alexander, who did not know the Parisians, and of Mother Bee and cousin Dickie, who did not perhaps like anyone.

But it was no doubt also true that everyone was keeping up a hearty front. As usual, they were late.

Madame Lacrone, grave, old and sweet, stepped heavily out of the derelict car as impeccable as when she had entered it; nothing ever seemed to ruffle either her clothes or her spirit. She shook hands with the adults, all of whom were gathered outside to greet the new guests. She kissed the children, and presented each with a smile and small gift. It had required all the exceptional organizational powers of Miniver's office manager to buy so many gifts – there was one even for little Dickie – in so little time. Each of the presents was well chosen.

Josianne Gougoux's clothes had not suffered from the longish trip either, but only because they were in the usual mess before she had started. Neither the gods nor her own appetites worked to Josianne's physical advantage, but she could have minimized the disadvantages by wearing clothes that fit.

Why she did not was a mystery. Perhaps she was one of those people who buy new clothes for the slimmer person they expect to be in two months, or perhaps she was simply wearing the clothes of the slimmer person she had once been. Whatever the reason, the effect was unlovely, and her general slovenliness was an unwelcome addition to such a state of affairs: zippers incompletely zipped, absent or forgotten buttons, blouses half-untucked. Josianne Gougoux looked fatter than the strange priest she found before her – she looked almost as fat as her boss, who, the perfect opposite of his number two assistant, draped himself in the large, stylish clothes of an obese dandy with good taste.

In a word, Josianne seemed unconscious of her appearance, and this was a mercy, at least for her. She resembled nothing so much as a lively, good-natured mongrel: she compensated in gaiety, quick wit and good-heartedness for what she lacked in physical beauty. Everyone liked her, and her fatter, more elegant boss would not have wanted to run his business without her.

Josianne kissed everyone except Miniver, Martin and the strange priest. She even kissed the two old ladies in the background, whom she only vaguely knew. Mother Nora smiled and asked who all these nice people were; Mother Bee wiped her cheek when the younger woman turned away.

Gérard had already stumbled out the other side of the ancient vehicle, and onto the dog, which yelped in long-suffering patience. He would have kissed everyone there and the dog as well, but he did not quite dare. He was full of gratitude and joy just to be present.

*

Lunch was always served late at Harwood House. After a light version of the usual preliminary drinks, Miniver and his team moved, but did not retire, to the library: the doors were left open – Jeanne had taken the children to inspect badger setts in the forest – and the others came and went, picking up what they could of their new situation.

Mme. Lacrone was handling liaison with the authorities – with Marie, whom she knew well, with the *préfecture*, with one or two *ex-ministres,* with a few *députés* and

sénateurs: Miniver was already having to draw heavily on a miscellany of debts owed to him – returns on many favors he had done for others, regularly and honestly cultivated over many years. He had always known of human, and thus of his own, vulnerability. Like a squirrel in autumn, he had systematically built up a stock of treasures against future hardship, avoiding enemies as far as possible, cultivating acquaintance – sometimes among people he did not like – whenever he could. This had never seemed hypocrisy to him, but common sense. Yet even in so criminal a case, even with Marie's help, even with the return on so many of these favors, it was not easy to commandeer most of several local *brigades.*

Josianne made a presentation of everything she knew, which was a lot, about Cecil the Hun, even as she continued to find out more. The breakout had been very bloody, like most things involving Cecil. There were no clues yet as to where he might be hiding, though the probability was Paris.

Miniver asked Josianne for a summary of everything in Cecil's *dossier*, and of course this information magnetized almost everyone in the house. Miniver let them stay because he felt they should be informed, and because he generally sought to be as candid and unsecretive as possible. Alexander and Ben in particular needed to learn a lot of facts they did not know at all.

"Saperlipopette! Ee's a weal son-off-a-beach, cease Cecil," said Josianne. "Please excuse my Fwench."

Josianne's English was as good, and vernacular, as her accent was strong. When they worked with Mme. Lacrone or with Gérard, she and Miniver usually spoke in French.

"Ee's in pwison for diffewent cwimes. One night in ze fowest ee tied a man's wists wit wire and ... did somesing orrible." She knew that, even in more private circumstances, her squeamish boss did not like to dwell on cruel graphic detail.

"And zen ee killed im for no weason, I sink."

She paused, theatrically, and lit yet another cigarette, not unhappy to be fixing the attention of everyone in the house.

"Cecil finds pleasure to give pain and umiliation to people. Ee wants to master people, and for im mastewy is bwutality. I sink ee is one of zose cwazies oo can't feel say are somebody unless sea udders are nobody."

Josianne's commentary interested Miniver keenly: she rivaled him in her reputation for understanding criminal motive and behavior. Unconsciously, he leaned forward.

She paused again, shuffled through a few disorganized papers, then resumed her presentation. "And dare was a vewy bloody attack on two young persons in sea fowest, but it was dark and say could not identify Cecil. But it was Cecil, all white. Evewybody knows sat."

It was evident that she was keen to give details. "One time ee was poaching in sea fowest as usual. Cecil ad just sawed off sea antlers of a big buck and a fowest guard saw sea lights and caught im wed-anded. Cecil shot sea guard and zen took ease saw and ...."

Miniver knew the story. A sharp word from him put an end to Josianne's narrative.

*

Everyone hoped that this lunch, though not as ambitious as that of the preceding day, would be delicious and memorable: it was perhaps the last they would have together for some time.

Cosette sensed this even before Gérard was imposed upon her as kitchen help. He spoiled the mayonnaise, burned the *lardons* and sneezed in the salad. Cosette looked at him in lucid amazement, but since she liked everyone and was as happy-go-lucky as her lackey, they did not quarrel. It would have been difficult even for someone far less smiling and good-natured than she not to like this well-intentioned buffoon; Gérard was always so utterly sorry for his misdemeanors that one rarely had the heart to take him to task.

The lunch was served. Impassive as always, Martin served Mother Bee with a modest helping of *saumon fumé* and disappeared from her vicinity, not with the torpor one might expect in a one-armed old man, but with the alacrity of an old soldier who understands the meaning of artillery about to find its range.

Served almost last, cousin Dickie nonetheless had to be reminded not to eat before the others, and to remove the chewing gum from his mouth before he inserted the smoked salmon – almost pointless advice, since once he had tasted the salmon he would have no more to do with it. Miniver congratulated him on having at least tried. Mother Bee muttered something about the old days and having to eat everything one was served, and for once her comments brought general approbation. Dickie looked at them all as if they were Martians.

An angel passed, as the French say: there was silence at the table. The lunch was necessarily awkward, and other angels would come and go. All four young children were brooding, though in Bernard's case this was hard to recognize, since he was rarely expansive. Isabel was deeply disappointed not to be spending the planned week with her father, and in addition sensed that something was wrong, and being kept from her; she could hardly hold back her tears. Henri was furious to be leaving his wonderful uncle.

Dickie was brooding for a different reason: Cosette had served an exquisite beef *carpaccio* for this hot summer's day, long marinated in shining olive oil, fresh basil, chives and lemon juice. No one had dreamt of subjecting little Dickie to the torture of raw beef, but he nevertheless protested that his cooked version smelled funny and announced that he would not touch it. This time he did not even try.

*

It was decided that Alix, Cosette, the two grandmothers and the four small children would go to visit an old friend of Alix's family, whom she had not seen in years, and who had a very large house in Auvergne in which to receive them. The friend had already been contacted and invited them to come as soon as they could. Miniver liked this solution because such a distant friend, lost in the heart of darkest France, could not be tracked down – in fact, the friend had offered to invite several of the couple's closest relatives as well.

There was little to be said while the preparations for departure were made. Even the loquacious Alexander was mostly silent. The house was full of the wordless sounds of luggage and preparations, punctuated by occasional orders and comments.

The dog bounded forward when Miniver opened the French doors. He stopped her and asked Gérard to call her back – not a difficult maneuver, since the big dog had begun to dote on Gérard, rather the way a mother loves a baby.

Miniver walked alone, through the forest and across the fields of man-high corn and younger sugarbeet, to meet with the *capitaine* of the *gendarmerie*. He kept one hand in his light jacket pocket, but he did not hurry, and did not seem alarmed.

*

It was the first time he had seen Marie since the beginning of the crisis. She smiled as soon as she saw her fat friend approaching. A young hare started from among the sugarbeet tops and raced off in front of them.

"Forgive me, Miniver," she said in French. "Perhaps I shouldn't be smiling at this *conjoncture.* But we've been through worse together before. We'll survive this too. I'm just happy to see you."

It was superficially surprising that so small and so unprepossessing a person could be such a competent and formidable *gendarme,* though Miniver was used to the fact.

"If things do turn out well, it'll be thanks in good part to you. Everything you've set up here looks good. On my way out I didn't even see the second car – is it still there?"

"Four-wheel land vehicle, well off the road, tracks brushed out. About eight hundred meters in, maybe a hundred meters off, to the North, camouflaged."

"Thank you, Marie." He offered her a cigar and she declined. "What's your prediction?"

"We're on full alert – almost twenty men just here. But I don't think we'll see him for some time. Cecil's a poacher, a tracker. And even he is smart enough to lie low for a few days, or a few weeks, before he makes his move."

Miniver drew on his big, smooth cigar and settled into the pleasure of a long talk with his friend. He reflected that, for him, cigars always made conversations better, though the reverse was not invariably true.

"That's my guess too. The one thing he knows how to do is to lie in wait for his prey, and in this I'm turning tables on him. He has to come to his prey – advantage one for me. And his prey is alerted – advantage two. And his prey is smarter than he is – advantage three." Here he laughed. "Cecil, as I see it, has only the advantage of choosing his moment – partial surprise. I figure the odds are three to one on me."

Marie reacted to this confidence the way the priest had, but she could only more or less agree. "He's certainly never before been up against someone who can defend himself, Miniver." She put her hand on his arm. "But I wouldn't want to see you underestimating Cecil."

She changed the subject. "How's Alix taking this?"

"She's going. To friends in *l'Auvergne.* I've asked for police guards to be posted at the houses of a few relatives too, though I don't think there's actually much danger. Damn Cecil! He's costing me most of the credits I've built up over years."

"Maybe I can help with that. I have a few of my own. I should have thought of it earlier."

"Wait, *mon amie.* You know I'll call on you if I have to. Right now you're doing everything I need."

Her eyes took on a kind of disquiet. "I'm going to have to pull off most of my *garçons* pretty soon. I'm sorry. You know I have no choice. When are the ladies and the children leaving?"

Miniver studied his cigar, looking for the satisfaction it was supposed to bring. "Tomorrow morning."

Marie looked at him for a long time, in that kind of silence that is possible only between close friends or people who live together. Then – it was no doubt the best act of friendship she had to offer – her professional competence took over. "So who will stay?"

He smiled. "Alexander, of course. He's already enjoying the whole business, though he's trying to hide it, in deference to other people's feelings. I don't think he's fooling anyone."

"He'll be good to have with you. He can pray better than any priest I know. Can he shoot?"

"Better than any priest I know."

"Listen to his advice, Miniver. He's a shrewd man."

Miniver skipped this. "And Ben. His fiancée Jeanne wanted to stay as well, and I had to turn her down."

Marie hesitated for a moment only. "You were right. You don't know her as well as you know the others, and that would make her more difficult in a team. And then" – here she put her hand on his arm again – "you'd be too worried about her to act as freely as you may have to."

"That's what I told her. I hope she understood." The ash on his cigar was now more than an inch long, and he knocked it off.

"And Martin. I'm not sure he should stay but I don't think I'd have the courage even to suggest that he leave with the ladies."

"Why shouldn't he stay? Even an *ordonnance* is part of the fighting machine. I don't know the story of his years in the army, but he positively glows with military attitude. I doubt that's all superficial."

"He's a good shot – he has a wonderful old long-barreled army MAB that he used in competition. You can't find them any more."

Marie seemed reassured. "So there will be four of you? More than enough."

Miniver hesitated, then looked away. "Five, perhaps. I haven't decided what to do with Gérard."

"Gérard! You're joking! Gérard, your *bonne à tout faire*? The man's an incarnate error. He won't be useless, he'll be dangerous. Surely you're not going to keep Gérard?"

Miniver kept silent for some time. "It's true I don't feel at ease, or objective, about this. I know he botches just about everything he does. I understand that part of my motive has to do with his feelings. If I send him away he'll feel humiliated. He's perfectly devoted. He's been included in just about everything I've done for years."

"So you'd send away Alix and Jeanne and keep Gérard? You might as well keep the grandmothers too, just for good measure."

Miniver looked away again, to reflect, or to avoid her gaze. "He's a good shot."

It was a feeble excuse. Marie, who used words sparingly, added nothing.

"And Alix certainly wouldn't want to stay." It was almost an afterthought.

He watched his cigar smoke evaporate into the summer air. "Well, I don't know. I probably won't decide until the last minute."

*

Josianne made a vague and unsuccessful effort to tuck in her too-tight blouse. She was smoking and chewing gum at the same time. "Ben, your uncle gives me the

creeps," she said in French. "A priest isn't sposed to look at a girl the way he looks at me."

Ben was neither smoking nor chewing. He laughed. "Alexander? You're worried about my Uncle Sasha? Ah, Josianne, you should come to Mass more often – listen to his sermons, maybe. I won't say that my uncle is ... constitutionally incapable of ... bothering you. But there are things in life stronger even than the attraction of a pretty girl."

Benedict, like all the men in his family, was *galant,* and Josianne, who received very few compliments on her person, was sensitive to this one.

"Priests are forbidden to act, Josianne; they're not forbidden to look. They're not forbidden to be men." The more Ben thought about this, the funnier it seemed to him, and the more his explanations were interrupted by his laughter.

"Don't take it the wrong way, Josianne – you're pretty enough to fix any man's eye anywhere." Here he had to stop again, to laugh and perhaps to swallow the lie. Josianne was radiant.

"Any man's eye, anywhere. But consider, here. He can't very well look at his brother's wife, or his nephew's fiancée, or his twelve-year-old niece. That leaves Mother Bee and Mother Nora, whose combined age is something around two hundred – and lovely you."

A sharp yelp came from the kitchen, accompanied by the sound of breaking porcelain. Since no growling was heard, Ben assumed it was Gérard, and not young Dickie. The subject changed.

Ben's explanation had been too thorough, and Josianne felt less flattered than she had. But she stopped worrying about the priest.

July 2, 9.15 am

Miniver was as miserable as he was rotund. He might as well have been surrounded by Cecils and Huns.

The hardest part was saying goodbye to the disappointed children. They had all looked joyfully forward to a few weeks not only with their father but also with their inimitable uncle and the rest of the family. Now it was all being put off until the *St. Glin-Glin*, and no one would tell them why.

Bernard looked solemn and hurt, as if this were his personal rejection. Henri was so angry he could not speak and would not look at his father. Isabel's eyes just brimmed with tears, which her father's eyes briefly reflected. Remembering that Alix's advice was almost always intelligent and practical, for a moment he thought that she was right after all – that the whole family should simply go away together.

Mother Bee had been complaining loudly about the heat and thanking Miniver sarcastically for a wonderful holiday. Now she was rolling her eyes because if they were going to go, they should go, for Chrissake. Alexander smiled at her and said he was sorry to hear her swear. She squeaked out a thin "Oh, Jeez," but then kept silence, awed by the giant, who seemed both strange and familiar. Mother Nora took Alexander's arm for no apparent reason, and smiled. The priest smiled back.

There was the usual confusion of two cars, mixed baggage and forgotten articles. Nora asked several times where they were going, and was told each time. She began to fret about leaving behind her little dog Mignon. Mignon had died long before. Through it all Miniver was conscious of Gérard's eyes constantly on him – Gérard who still did not know if he was leaving or staying, and had not dared to ask.

Josianne bounced into view and put her hand on the other arm of the newly-understood cleric. Father Alexander ceased smiling and began beaming. Mother Nora had no idea why, but she beamed too, and the threesome formed the only bright spot in the swarming clouds before the poor fat master of the house.

Jeanne said nothing and gave no sign of reproach – worse, Miniver knew she felt no reproach. But he saw her tears and her fears in leaving Ben and in leaving them all, and he saw that Ben would cry too, if he let himself.

Alix was distressed to leave her garden at such a critical time and was making Martin promise yet again to water heavily twice a week, in early morning or in the evening, if there was not enough rain.

The dog, packed into the back of the old station wagon, was looking sorry to be leaving Gérard, sorry to be leaving his master, sorry to be far from his mistress Isabel, who was in the other car, and sorry to be near Dickie, who was not.

Josianne, before climbing into the old car, extended her hand so emphatically to the big priest that he had no choice but to take it and kiss it, in spite of the fact that they were outside, that she was unmarried and that he was a priest. The episode probably amused him even more than it did Josianne. Mother Nora, smiling on his other side, decided she too should give her hand to be kissed, and so it was.

Alix embraced her husband briefly before she climbed into the car, but not before Miniver saw love and fear in her eyes. The dog yelped. Dickie had inched his way to the back of the car and had sat on her tail, no doubt on purpose. Gérard was still standing helplessly to the side, not knowing whether he was to climb into one of the cars or stay with the Magnificent Four.

Given Miniver's nature, there was in fact no contest. "Gérard," he said discreetly, "the first thing we're going to do after their departure is a bit of target shooting. Perhaps you can set things up in the cellars."

And in this general vale of tears, Gérard, adding his, though they were well concealed, went off to his job as one of the Magnificent Five.

*

Some time after the two vehicles had disappeared down the twisting, dusty road, Miniver walked out again to see Marie. Overhead, as if accompanying him, floated the periodic shriek of a huge female buzzard. The edge of the forest included a stand of poplar trees, planted back in the days when people still used matches. He listened to the sound of those trees, born for the gods of wind.

Marie saw him and came to him. "I don't like to see you out and visible like this."

"I won't be, shortly. Preparations for our little siege begin this afternoon. You and your men can leave after lunch – say, three-thirty? Make it five. Give me a secure radio channel. We'll use it to make occasional arrangements for provisions and any supplies we may need. We've done none of that yet."

"We can stay longer if you need more time."

"You've already done more than you'll find easy to justify. I'd prefer to ask you back later – who knows?" He looked back: from the shadowless midday fields here, of corn and wheat and sugarbeet, nothing could be seen of either of the houses in the forest, a green mass of oak and beech and pine.

Marie's immediate superior, come to inspect the *déploiement provisionnel,* had remained discreetly off in the background during this *entretien.* Marie kissed the fat man on the cheek, said goodbye and walked back to where the lieutenant colonel was waiting. She watched Miniver walking back into the forest, and was at first too moved to speak.

"There was a time, *mon colonel,* when that man stood by me, and almost no one else did. *Ce sont des choses que l'on n'oublie pas*."

*

None of the men had even discussed staying or not staying. Neither they nor the people who had just left had introduced the question. It was simply understood, with the exception of poor Gérard, that all of them would stay.

Miniver had not yet gone down to the cellars to see how badly Gérard had prepared the shooting range. The lunch hour was upon them, and it was not clear to Miniver, at this critical moment with no Cosette, what their culinary fate would be. It was a preoccupation of a sort that rarely left him, even in the face of danger greater than anything Cecil the Hun was likely to occasion that afternoon.

His fears were allayed when Martin, bang on the tardy hour, served as usual the lunch which he, unusually, had prepared himself. It pricked Miniver's sensitive conscience to think that he had ever entertained the least notion of not keeping this magic old man with them.

The meal was nevertheless one that lacked, if not the finesse, then at least the completeness, of Cosette's complex and beloved repasts. It was a lunch for men – just the thing to restore confidence, and to remind them all that an *ordonnance* does not only stand and wait: a boar's head *pâté* with heavy black bread, blood sausages with an exquisite, liquid, French-style nutmeg-flavored *purée de pommes de terre,* no cheese – it was a Harwood House prejudice at meals other than breakfast – and weightless Paris-Brest pastries that would have made them believe in God, if they had not all believed already.

Gérard, having finished his mess in the cellars, had tried to help in the kitchen but had only drowned the salad in too much vinegar, which gave everyone except Ben an excuse to take none. Martin then demonstrated that he knew how to produce genuine espresso, instead of the usual domestic *café filtré.*

Although only Ben and perhaps Martin could objectively be said not to be disappointed, everyone implicitly understood that wine and brandy must henceforth be consumed in almost moderate quantities. Miniver tried to compensate with especially fine cigars and bottles, though these in fact seemed only to make things worse. Just now they were surrounding a bottle of old *fitou.*

"First," said Miniver, "the ground rules. No one goes out unnecessarily by day. No one smokes outside at night. The curtains must be pulled all day and all night, at least until preparations are finished."

The priest was the only man present who could have thought of challenging these orders: Martin had already, with his slow, deliberate movements, begun discreetly

closing the window drapes. Gérard, catching on, leapt to his feet and tried to do the same, but the closing mechanism jammed. In spite of his inclination to take this whole Cecil business seriously, almost as one takes pleasure seriously, the priest found such restrictions excessive and disagreeable. But again he deferred, in silence and respect.

"Martin," said Miniver, "serve more coffee please, and join us. It's time we detailed our preparations." Martin circulated an oblong silver platter and sat down just outside the circle of the four men. He disliked familiarity and respected rank.

No one spoke. Like many intelligent people in authority, both Miniver and his brother preferred to hear what others had to say before giving their own opinions, which too often had the conclusive and prejudicial weight of decision.

Gérard, who was capable of chattering like a magpie in other circumstances, was far too awed by his revered boss to be the first to speak in such circumstances, and Martin felt it was not his place.

Ben broke the silence. "Monsieur de Toulon keeps a number of dogs to guard his estate. Should we bring some here?"

"That's not a bad idea, Ben," said the priest. "I know a man who could probably lend us his whole pack of attack dogs."

"Attack dogs?" said Miniver. "We certainly don't need attack dogs. Maybe guard dogs, for warning, nothing more."

He lit a panatella. "Consider. Attack dogs could attack *us*, if we weren't careful. They'd have to be muzzled. We'd un-muzzle them only if we knew Cecil had come. By then we might as well act ourselves. What we need is early warning."

The priest ruffled. "Proper attack dogs can neutralize a man in the dark. Sometimes they're killed doing it. Better the dog than one of us. That's what they're for."

Miniver studied the burning tip of his cigar and decided it had started badly. "Alexander, you're a hard priest. I suppose I could overcome my tenderness for dogs, but I just sent Mountain away so that such a thing wouldn't happen to her."

"These wouldn't be your dogs – they're anonymous dogs."

"I'd still prefer to avoid canine carnage if I can. If we kept the dogs inside all the time they'd be miserable and Martin's life would be awful. If we kept them in the cellars they'd be no use at all. If we kept them outside they could easily be

poisoned, and in any case they'd have to be chained – if they gave us warning we'd have to go out there and set them loose."

He paused. "Doesn't anyone else have other ideas?"

Ben entered the breach again. "I can set up some electronic surveillance. And trip-wires outside, maybe – I think every door and window here in the house is already wired: this isn't the first time my father's been in a dangerous situation. A bit more monitoring would be a piece of cake, and it would free us to make plenty of other preparations – or just to live, instead of looking out."

Alexander was still keen. "How about snares, traps, maybe a deadweight drop? They're cheap and easy to make. When I was in the Philippines I saw a lot of them. The guerrillas planted them everywhere."

"*Mon Dieu*, Alexander, do you know what those things do to a man? – impale him, splatter him, squash him flat?"

"Isn't that what they're supposed to do?"

Miniver was beginning to feel exasperated by his brother's simplicity. "In the first place, none of you had better forget that we can't eliminate – that is, we can't kill or even wound Cecil and his pals, if he brings pals – if he has any pals – until they've given us clear cause. I wouldn't like this to end in falsification of the facts."

"Which could nonetheless be managed in a pinch."

"Yes, Alexander, if need be. Let need not be. And what if the human ruin we pry out of one of your contraptions is neither Cecil nor one of his pals?"

Ben placed himself and his electronic surveillance between the sparring chieftains. "We'll need as complete a telemonitoring system as possible, covering as many doors and windows as we can manage; there are too many here to be covered completely. I can rig up some sort of outer perimeter alarm system that's both silent and doesn't flash light – a pocket vibrator, if you stay in radio contact. That might be difficult, though, for anyone in the cellars. I can set up a few infrared and daylight cameras. It'll be fun. But I'll need your help – help from all of you – to map things out."

Gérard now felt free to speak. "What about a big fence – some kind of big electronical fence?" Gérard's French was almost as bad as his English.

Miniver offered him another cigar, as consolation. "Two problems, Gérard. The first: Harwood House is a big place. Even if I accepted tearing up my wife's

gardens, for which she'd have my extensive hide, it would take a very long time to construct an insurmountable fence all around the house. And those who were building it would be constantly exposed."

Gérard looked crestfallen, but he lit his consolation nonetheless.

"And there's an even more serious objection to a fence. One of our advantages over Cecil is that of drawing him in, as a spider draws an insect into its web. We lose that if we enclose ourselves in a steel shell."

These seemed irrefutable arguments, and for some time everyone remained silent.

"If I may make a suggestion, sir." Martin's formal voice, breaking into the circle, almost startled, so little was it expected. The old man did not continue, and it became clear to Miniver that he was literally waiting for permission to speak.

"Please. What is it you wish to suggest, Martin?"

"Geese, sir."

"Geese?"

"Yes, sir. I am told the American Army uses them to great effect to guard the perimeters of some of their compounds, and of course they worked very well in Rome. They appear to be more effective than dogs."

As usual, the big priest could not hold his enthusiasm. "Of course, of course! Martin, you are an inexhaustible source of intelligent ideas!"

"Merci, Monsieur l'abbé." The old man looked pleased. Yet more silence ensued.

Miniver sat back with his non-alcoholic beverage, passed the humidor to his brother and smiled.

"I wish I could see Marie's face when I ask her to ship in half-a-dozen geese."

July 4

If the cellars of Harwood House were little short of amazing, this was because they had been part of the old castle. It had burned in the eighteenth century; the New House had been constructed on its foundations a century later.

In fact the cellars extended well beyond the more recent building; they included several huge arched rooms and innumerable smaller ones. Although no electricity

had ever been installed, it was apparent that serious living had occurred in their depths: the floors of all the big rooms were covered in great alternating black-and-white-diamond marble tiles, and the wide doorways were of intricately carved stone. In this ornate stone one still felt the old *château.*

Just now the cellars were booming with the sound of gunfire. Gérard had done his job almost well: logs and triple bales of hay at ten, twenty-five and fifty paces – all possible in a single gigantic stone room. There was hay everywhere on the tile floor, but the walls were properly protected, which was *l'objectif de l'opération,* and the paper targets were correctly fixed, at man-height. The men had no human-silhouette targets, and had to settle for stags, boars and concentric bull's-eyes.

Miniver's worries had been resolved in part: the two brothers were wearing *casques* that muffled the ringing shots enough to prevent damage to their hearing. But the master of the house remained distinctly ill-at-ease about possible damage to the bottles in the neighboring wine-cellar, gunpowder and vibration not being indicated for the storage of vintage liquids. There were already wine problems enough, thought Miniver, because the cellars were too dry – perhaps because they had been built at the top of a hill, and because they were made of almost unbelievably thick cut stone. For years he had covered his wine-cellar floor with fine gravel, which he or Martin sprinkled with fresh water almost every week.

A large box of 9 mm parabellum cartridges was set out on a low table to the side. Years ago Miniver had made, to a young Benedict glowing with pleasure, a gift of the same pistol as the one he himself generally used: a police-style Ruger P85. The weapon was small enough to be concealed, especially on an ample personage, and Miniver had always dreamed that he and his eldest son might one day work together – something they in fact had never done, at least until now.

The shooting of the moment, at twenty-five meters, was remarkably close competition: after twenty minutes Miniver was only two points ahead of his son – the father's shots often grouped slightly northeast, at one o'clock, the son's symmetrically opposite, southwest, at seven o'clock. As in their chess games together, both men loved these moments between father and son, and each, *dans le feu de l'action*, hated to lose.

The kitchen having been left immaculate, old Martin arrived with his one arm and his collector's ancient French military MAB PAPF-1. He waited silently, not for his turn but for an invitation to shoot.

When the invitation was made, he said "Thank you, sir," put on the third *casque* and loaded his pistol with the same illegal 9 mm parabellum cartridges. He emptied several clips with almost exactly the same results as those of his predecessors, who

were too kind to speak of the advantage he had from his pistol's special, long, competition barrel.

Gérard stumbled down the stairs with his enormous Colt Python .357 magnum and its ammunition: he could not of course use the special cache of 9 mm cartridges. He did not drop the mighty piece of American steel – yet another gift from Miniver – but he dropped the box of cartridges, which tumbled in metallic music down the wide and winding steps, falling always toward the center, where the old stone was worn hollow by centuries of feet.

Martin, alarmed to be in the proximity of an armed man of comparable dexterity, confined himself to addressing the problem of the forthcoming noise, since there were no more *casques.*

"I have taken the liberty, sir," he said to his master, "of bringing us all a supply of *boules Quies*." These were bizarre wax-and-cotton French contrivances, used to plug the ears.

"May I suggest their use, even for those who are wearing a *casque*?" Martin removed his own *casque,* wiped it clean with a spotless cotton handkerchief, and laid it aside for Gérard, who did not notice.

Though it was still day, Miniver was unwilling to leave the upstairs house unguarded until all preparations were complete: the priest, reading his breviary and smoking a cigar, had been left in one of the Harwood House towers that dominated all approaches. Miniver now asked Martin to replace Alexander, to give him the choice of the remaining pistols and revolvers in the family collection, and to invite him to come down and join the others.

The old servant, still nervous around an armed Gérard, left with a predictable and visible sense of relief which had, in fact, motivated Miniver's choice of him as Alexander's replacement.

Anticipating the forthcoming detonations of the huge revolver, Miniver worried again about his walls and wine. He directed Gérard to add a fourth bale of hay to the backdrop. While Gérard was downrange, wiring the bales together, Ben removed the clip from his pistol and set it on the table. His father did the same.

Gérard returned, put the *boules Quies* into his ears, was given the third *casque* by Miniver, and waited patiently for his invitation, which came promptly. He raised one arm, pointed his six-inch barrel and fired five rapid shots. In such an acoustic space, and in spite of *casques* and *boules Quies*, the cavernous, grouped booming of

the magnum cartridges almost stunned. No one saw or heard the approach of the dark priest.

Four of Gérard's shots were closer than anyone else's on the previous round, but one – not the first – was very wide. He said, "Damn!" – then saw the priest, blushed and added, "Excuse me, father."

Alexander, his hands still over his ears, laughed his booming Rabelaisian laugh. "It would indeed be better, *mon fils*, to say *shit*."

The priest, however, was caught up in a different enthusiasm, and he abandoned the subject. "Look, Miniver, what I found in your collection!" He produced from under his cassock an old but steel-framed Beretta 9 mm 951 recoil-operated pistol. "I haven't seen one of these since I was in Israel! I love it! It's just the thing for our little adventure. Look!"

He cocked it manually and applied the safety catch. "Cocked 'n' locked!"

The men put aside their weapons and Gérard hustled downrange with new targets. He fixed them upside down but it did not matter, since they were circular. Upon Gérard's return, the priest deactivated the safety, raised his right arm and looked downfield with both eyes open. Cocking manually after the first shot, he fired five times.

That first shot was as good as the others' best. The second was better. The last three were so tightly packed into the center that it was difficult to be sure that three bullets had passed through the same space.

Ben was impressed when he studied the target. "Shit, Uncle Sasha! You probably have the least accurate of all the pistols here – and it's one you didn't know."

Alexander was conscious of a venial sin of pride somewhere within him; it was a fault he would pluck out later. For the moment he could only smile.

"Praying, meditating and aiming have a lot in common, Ben," he said. "And I've been praying all my life."

July 5

The five men had to cook and fend entirely for themselves because Miniver wanted no one endangered by being in the vicinity of Harwood House at the wrong moment. Once or twice a village friend came by for Alix and was gently sent away. Miniver had made a point of not pretending the house was empty – that could deflect Cecil –

but no one was likely to come, without calling, for any of the men: the only one who lived there all the time was the ancient butler, and he was not a *garçon local.*

Miniver had also foreseen that they would be vulnerable doing shopping on their own, and here Marie and her *gendarmes* could help. This had the added advantage of enabling him to meet with his old friend from time to time, and to keep her up to date in a more congenial fashion than was possible on the phone.

The *gendarmes* cooperated with great good nature – it was in their interest, it was all very amusing, and Miniver and his people had their sympathy, not only because their *patronne* was his fierce ally.

The initial order always went through on the secure line, and the *gendarmes* themselves did all the shopping – discreetly, Miniver felt sure, since Marie was watching over them. When the order was on its way in an unmarked car, another call was put through. The car moved into the forest, along a road long ago closed by the *gardes forestiers;* it stopped a couple of miles from Harwood House. There was no access from the Harwood side, except by foot.

The weather at this time was hot and dry, but less so in the deep forest. All of the men except Martin, even the two brothers, had plenty of experience hiking long distances over rough and difficult territory – along the bottom of the Grand Canyon, among other places. Carrying supplies a few miles through the forest was a lark for them, and it gave them a chance to be out of the house.

Except for quantities of surveillance materials, they did not need a great many provisions. True to Miniver's reputation, there were already enough supplies of reputable liquids, aged cigars and ammunition for a siege, which in a sense this was. Everyone but Ben ate a lot of meat, which had to be brought in since they could not hunt, and the season was still too early for most fruits, but there were plenty of vegetables in Alix's garden, and cubic meters of dry goods in permanent stock, both as a matter of enthusiastic principle and in anticipation of weekend and other guests.

On each occasion, one or two armed men – all of them were always armed – stayed back, in the lookout tower or in the cellars with the radio contact Ben had managed to install even down in those depths. For the rest, they relied on tripwires. Miniver was often one of those who stayed behind – not, he said breathlessly to himself, because he wanted to avoid the trek, but because he knew that his was the one face Cecil the Hun was looking for, and would instantly recognize. He had even thought of disguising himself, but he did not.

The routine with the *brigade de gendarmerie* became a friendly joke for everyone concerned. The men sat around evenings, after their preparations, their dinner and

their shooting practice, and imagined things they needed: mangoes, fresh ginger, *verjus*, even more illegal ammunition, black-and-white still camera film. At one point Alexander literally had hosts brought in for Mass.

It was difficult, however, to come up with something more bizarre than their first request, for a half dozen full-grown geese, and this was the only time when the good nature and patience of the *gendarmes* wore thin.

July 6

The transport by *voiture de gendarmerie* of six big, nasty geese literally bristling with health had not taken place without sharp pains, a number of bruises, a great many bad words and something close to panic. Let him who has already been in a car with several loose geese be the first to laugh.

At the forest rendezvous, the transfer of the white beasts from the unmarked police vehicle to the hands of our heroes was another scene of *grandes emotions*. The broken box being unusable, three of the geese could not be carried off as a package. Although each loose goose was more interested in attacking and nipping than in running away, none of them seemed likely ever to heel and, in orderly fashion, follow the men all the way back to Harwood House – or drive the men before them, as the case more probably would have been.

The men found no better solution than to gather whatever string and wire they and the *gendarmes* could find and tie leashes to the geese – each by a foot, after they gave up on necks. This involved a great deal more time, pain, bruises and *gros mots*. The forest return to Harwood House that day was the only one that failed to be a jolly outing in the leafy summer woods.

*

By the time they arrived, Martin's former goose glory was fading fast in the thin and honking air. No one knew what to do with an aggressive cloud of geese. Ben, backing away from a sudden, head-pointing attack, had a disarming thought. "Whatever are we going to feed them?" His father looked alarmed.

But Martin was at hand. "I have taken the liberty, sir, of placing with Captain Liège an order for a quantity of wheat and dried maize. The first supplies should arrive tomorrow. Bread and water will keep them happy until then."

Feathery confusion seemed everywhere. Miniver wondered if the hungry geese were in fact trying to eat *them*.

Gérard appeared. Seizing a chance to make friends, he squatted and put out his hand to the nearest plumed monster. It lowered its head, stuck out its neck like a lance and charged so hard that he was literally bowled over. He fell backwards onto a large, liquid deposit of goose dropping. The blood was probably due to gravel cuts.

Even the priest was nonplussed. "How are we going to be sure they don't run away?" He gave a ferocious kick. "Or get them to?"

Martin was again at hand. "I believe, *Monsieur l'abbé*, that they will not run away. You have only to leave them in the gardens and they will attach themselves to the grounds."

The geese appeared to be having emotions too. The squawking and honking were so loud that Miniver had to raise his voice. "What if a fox catches one, Martin?"

"No fox, sir," shouted Martin, "would dare try."

*

That evening, during a recuperative tobacco-and-coffee session, each of the geese was given a name. Their leader, both in the sense that he was typically at the head of his troops and also in the sense that he was almost as mean as Cecil, was called Onion – perhaps because he was born to cause tears, whether of anger, frustration or physical pain. The others were Purée, Apple, Squawk, Mistake and Grease. Grease left the largest and most disgusting droppings. Squawk, of course, made the most noise.

For animals, the geese were remarkably perceptive of human personality: they did not treat or react to the different men in the same way. Although they showed no specifically sacerdotal consciousness of the priest as priest, they quickly learned about his rapid, big-booted, sacerdotal foot, and generally left him alone.

Martin also seemed to benefit from special treatment, or rather the lack of it; this was perhaps because of his habitual gravity, or perhaps because he fed them.

Miniver and Ben were spared little, but learned to deal with the geese as well as reason and the circumstances permitted. Ben was lithe and agile and often simply out-maneuvered the feathery things, in spite of their preference for silent attacks from the rear. Miniver tended to plant his colors and fight to the end. Each method met with some success, but there were also defeats and even the occasional rout.

Poor Gérard had the worst of the goose deal. Alexander had once reflected that failure and bad luck seemed to be Gérard's almost divine destiny: in spite of his good heart and his loyalty, he was careless and lazy. None of the other four had put

so little into life as had Gérard, and none had got so little out. Gérard's fundamental goose problem was that he was afraid of them, and that they confused him – the rout began in his mind as soon as he saw them coming. The geese knew this. From the first day, Gérard was their favorite victim. He fled from them on sight.

Martin's geese were nonetheless not a completely regrettable idea: they did the job they were fed for. Anything that moved, especially at night, out there on the perimeter of their domain, was denounced in a cacophony of honk and hiss.

July 8

It was inevitable that the men would grow hungry for diversion. Miniver and Martin devised something that charmed them all. On the near side of the wine-cellar was another stone-arched room, almost as big as the shooting room. Gérard and Ben moved five old leather armchairs there. With a few low tables well placed, a humidor full of well-aged Cuban cigars and some of the best wine and cognac money can buy, the over-arching room became a kind of clubhouse for big boys.

Given the fact that all of the cellar rooms were comfortably dry and cool, the only practical problem was the complete lack of electricity. Another man would have found it easy enough to run down an electric wire or two, but this would have offended Miniver's aesthetic and historical sense, and he found a prettier solution.

Like a number of middle-aged rich men, or would-be rich men, or men who are becoming rich, Miniver Lafritte was a hoarder. He rejoiced in his large wine-cellar – in the innumerable lesser bottles almost as much as in the rarest *bordeaux* and *bourgognes*. Inside or outside Harwood House were great quantities of, among other things, firewood, ammunition of several calibers, fine and less fine cigars, more than eight thousand books, more paper than the Harwood House correspondents and computers could ever use, sheet music of almost every imaginable kind, often in multiple versions, and a very, very large number of plain white candles, green candles and red candles.

These candles were a whimsy of his and also of Alix's, bought regularly when they found them at low prices. There were enough candles in Harwood House to last a lifetime, and now Miniver put them to magic use. Evening after evening the dark cellar steps led down to a fairy chamber of brilliant, shimmering light. The ceilings were so high that there was little sense of smoke or heat. Such a mass of light, bright and soft at the same time, was something few modern men have ever seen, although those who had lived in the original manor must have seen similar light every evening. Miniver was enchanted.

It was here, radio-linked to their system of trip wires and infrared but otherwise far from the world outside, and far from geese, that the five men, after lunch, after shooting, after dinner, smoked Havana cigars, drank liquids that glittered to the light of a hundred candles, and made the best conversation they could manage.

Although his enthusiasm for *l'aventure de Cecil* was evident and unabated, Alexander was still afraid that his brother was not preparing for the Hun in deadly earnest. "You know Miniver, the French side of our ancestry has already failed three times to take the Hun seriously."

"Cecil's not German."

"None of the preparations we've made will serve if Cecil has tapped our phone lines – I've heard you talking about all sorts of details on the phone with Marie."

"On the secure line, never on the regular phone. Anyway, Cecil isn't smart enough to tap a phone line."

"Is he smart enough to know someone who is?"

Miniver changed the subject. "Mass will again be at eight?"

July 8, 8 am

Father Alexander had seized his chance to encourage more spiritual wealth in the lives of these four half-idle Catholic men. In the very same arching stone candle-lit room – none of them saw anything inappropriate in it – at eight o'clock sharp every morning of the week, Mass was celebrated in Latin. The priest was as happy with this old-fashioned Latin opportunity as he was to look after the souls of his miniature flock. Although Ben was not confident that his electronic systems were perfected, the monitors were supposed to alert them to danger above, and they took the risk of leaving the upper house unmanned.

Mass every day – and Mass at such an hour – was a good deal more than any of the four men managed in normal times, but these were not normal times. Now they had no excuses and not much distraction, and the priest's terrifying sermons had a way of growing on them. As he pointed out to them almost every day, Mass is a wonderful ritual for people who are going to die.

Eight o'clock in the morning was an hour of which most of them had almost doubted the existence, especially when they had little to do, but no one was ever late. Miniver, indeed, had taken to solitary walks at dawn and dusk, which Alexander attributed to his brother's need to scout the grounds, to reflect on the preparations,

and perhaps also to a certain nervousness he would probably have denied. No doubt in order to remain almost invisible, Miniver always seemed to be absent just, as the French say, *entre chien et loup* – that time of murky light when one cannot tell a dog from a wolf. But dawn at this season came long before eight in the morning.

They would not forget the sermons they heard. Though they were all more or less familiar with Alexander's preaching at St. Damien – it was his reputation for priestly ferocity that first brought him to the attention of Captain Liège – nothing could quite have prepared them for what they encountered in this glittering, ancient stone chamber.

Most modern priests try to be nice, and kind, and good. They try to love, and not to judge, for God is Love. Most of the sheep left in their flocks are so old they're scared, so lonely they're miserable, or so young they can't yet defy their absent parents' order to go to Catechism classes. The last thing these priests want is to scare off the few who remain, and who will blame them? But the God of Whom Father Alexander spoke now was a God of a different mettle.

The old Roman ritual prepared this. The choral music was recorded – oddly, Ben and Miniver never even thought of playing the music themselves – and Alexander varied it every day: Charpentier, Vivaldi, Byrd. Sometimes Ben and Alexander chanted, together or separately, a more or less Gregorian plainsong, which echoed off the stone. Although the two brothers loved American blues and gospel music, none was ever heard down here. In this fiercely old-fashioned place, the music downstairs was as old as the furniture up, and even more uncompromising.

So, perhaps, was Alexander's vision of God. Every morning, with merciful brevity, it is true, but with merciless intensity, Alexander preached to his four brethren of sin, of damnation, of redemptive forgiveness, and only then of human and divine love.

The sins were specific and, if they were never aimed at a particular sinner, they were well tailored to the group. The giant priest spoke of gluttony and of lust, of anger and of laziness, of self-satisfaction and the waste of time: of the stuff of sinful life; and he spoke of Hell. Perhaps remembering his brother's phrase, he even once spoke of Cecil as one of God's children. Every morning the four men came to Mass keen to hear what this troublesome priest would say, and every morning they walked away the opposite of comforted.

"Think not that I am come to bring peace on earth: I came not to bring peace, but a sword."

Father Alexander was something of a renegade; rigorously Catholic and traditional in almost every gesture, he had the literary habit of quoting the King James Bible.

"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." The words rang in the stone room.

Most of all, the huge, black-bearded priest spoke of egocentricity. Standing simply before them, with no pulpit, he spoke of *l'égoïsme* as the final sin of the virtuous. He discounted the petty selfishness of doing or taking what one wanted – of putting one's appetites before those of others. He spoke long and slowly, emphatically, about the greater egoism of understanding subjectively, of making the world over into one's own idea, of seeing what one wished to see.

"When you talk with your neighbor, if you talk with your neighbor, do you talk to him, do you talk to her, or do you listen? Most of us use other people, use conversation, as a kind of masturbation, like a dog rubbing against somebody's leg. We listen politely to their blather, waiting for our chance to dwell upon ourselves."

He paused and looked at each of them. "Jesus," he said, "is your escape from the cage of the ego."

Even that first morning, at the first Mass, every man took communion. By the third day all four had asked to make confession to him. The siege of Harwood House had also become a siege of the self:

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

July 10

Miniver was so angry that he broke his own security rule: he left the house empty. The big priest was just emerging, with all three others, from the screen of forest beeches. Over his shoulder was slung a dog-sized roebuck. The antlers were superb. All the men were smiling. The animal had a small hole in the thoracic cage just behind and below its left shoulder. A large, bloody hole was visible in the shattered right shoulder.

"What the hell is that?" roared Miniver.

Alexander smiled a little sheepishly and everyone except Martin talked simultaneously. Eventually the story emerged.

The four men had gone to a rendezvous with the plain-clothes *gendarmes* at the meeting point a few miles off. Normally, Martin did not go on these treks: he had a

great deal of stamina for an old man, and exceptional dexterity for a one-armed one, but trekking materials over miles, in the presence of younger and fitter men, would have suggested a lack of respect on their part which he did not wish to expose them to. And it must be admitted that most of the men – first Gérard, then Miniver, then Alexander – wore down a little as the miles accumulated. Only Ben never seemed to tire. On this trek, however, Martin had gone along for the exercise, leaving the house in Miniver's solitary care.

They were returning gaily with a new supply of pickled green cherries, *huile de noix*, insulation-packed red fruit sherbets and miscellaneous books of poems, which they were fond of reading to each other in the cellar candlelight. Each man was carrying his *arme à poing* – the same as those used in the cellar firing range. All of these weapons were concealed, except Gérard's huge Colt, which he bore proudly in an egregious studded leather cowboy holster.

Alexander was fascinated by Martin's old French army competition PAPF-1, had borrowed it on several occasions, and had, for the trek, borrowed it once again, lending Martin his Beretta. And something had happened that was too much for Alexander's self-control, which was not always as extensive as it might have been.

At fifty yards' distance, a remarkably graceful roebuck had appeared, outlined against the sky at the crest of the hill the men were climbing. The beauty of the animal, the meat instinct and the passion for the PAPF-1 were more than the priest could resist.

Perceiving the humans, the animal froze for perhaps a second, and a second was enough for Alexander. He produced the pistol instantly, straightened his arm and fired. The buck began its bound and then dropped, *tué net*, on the instant.

Now it was Miniver's turn to lose control. "*Merde!* What were you thinking of, Alexander? In the first place, it's out of season – it's their rutting season! – and needless to say you have no *bracelet.* Is this how we thank Marie and her *gendarmes?*"

Alexander thought to himself that the *gardes forestiers*, and not the *gendarmes*, were generally responsible for hunting offences, but he rightly judged that this was not the moment for jurisdictional nicety. He stood therefore humbled. Onion judged the moment opportune to sneak up from behind and nip hard at the priest's calves. Gérard took one look at the geese and fled, pursued by Apple and Mistake, long necks extended and heads low.

"And if that's not enough for you, Alexander, think of this: the sound of that shot carried for miles. Perhaps you'd like to send up some flares as well?"

The priest vaguely shook off a goose. He was thinking that a single shot in the forest was hardly enough to help a man as stupid as Miniver's Cecil, and this time he spoke out.

"Cecil's too dumb, *tchiot frère*, to pick up on a single shot."

Miniver hesitated among the settling feathers, for once not knowing what to say, then turned away so that no one could see him smiling.

Ben had been impressed and said so. "I don't think I've ever seen so fine a shot – not just the accuracy, but the speed. Uncle Sasha got it off in one second." The young man did not try to hide his admiration, and the uncle could not conceal his pride.

Gérard, sneaking back after the five geese had dispersed, chimed in. "That," he said to Miniver, looking nervously away for fear of provoking his boss's anger, "that was real perspicacious shooting. I wish I had the same qualification."

July 11

It was evening in the glittering hall, the day after the scene above, the *digestif* moment after a savory dinner of *cuissot de chevreuil aux trois purées* and some of the last very old burgundies in the world. The reconciled brothers were smoking montecristo n° fours, which both Ben and Martin had declined as promptly as Gérard had accepted. But Miniver had apparently given orders to serve only coffee. Gérard looked particularly disappointed, and reflected silently that Miniver often seemed more generous after lunch, even in this time of siege.

Miniver turned to his brother. "You spoke, Alexander, of Cecil being too dumb to pick up on the shot." His voice was now dispassionate, fixed lucidly on the subject, and Alexander perfectly understood it to be such. This was not a return to the anger of the day before. His brother continued.

"You know we have a lot of poachers around here. I've helped the *gardes* catch a few myself. There are different sorts. Many of them are harmless, except to the animals they kill, but some are aggressive and dangerous. I've known them to fire on a *garde* at sight. Some are stupid, some are smart – or at least they know one thing: how to poach – how to lie out there for endless silent hours, waiting for what they're waiting for."

Martin, upright and silent in the discreet background, poured more steaming coffee. The cups were of translucent English porcelain, and very old. Alexander held his saucer in his left hand.

"Most of these *braconniers* are contemptible. They often saw off the antlers above the pedicle, so they can't even sell them properly, and they leave the meat to rot. They know little or nothing about the forest – they arrive in their cars from the suburbs, they drive around and shine spotlights into the clearings, they shoot. There are, for me, not many experiences in the world more fraught with a sense of waste and base human venality than to come across the rotting body of a magnificent, headless stag."

Miniver paused and drew on his cigar. "But a few of these poachers are remarkable woodsmen – men who know as much about wildlife, the forest and their prey as any man alive, be he hunter, guard or scientist. In fact, you know one of them – Gaspard Lepors."

"The hermit who lives in a cabin? I liked him."

"So do most of the other rare people who meet him, though I don't think they like the smell."

Alexander looked surprised. "I don't remember a smell."

"That, big brother, is because you're a saint, like Gaspard. But Gaspard is a saint of the wrong religion."

Alexander was not amused. "Don't talk such nonsense, Miniver." What the priest objected to was being himself called a saint. He had no idea about Gaspard, though the idea did not shock him.

Miniver sobered. "Sorry." As if to emphasize the sincerity of his apology, he did not immediately continue speaking.

Alexander waited, no one else spoke, and Miniver finally resumed. "Cecil is dumb the way an expert poacher is dumb, the way Gaspard is dumb."

"Is Gaspard stupid?"

"He can't read or write, but that of course has nothing necessarily to do with stupidity. He can hardly speak French, which does. I suspect that he'd be so incapable in a city that his very life would be in danger; I shouldn't think he's ever even been in a big town. But no one in the world knows better how to track a smart old buck, avoid *les gardes*, lie under the stars in invisible, soundless, human-odorless

waiting – smeared with pine needles and dung, more likely than not – and then, perfectly, suddenly, silently, to kill.

"That," Miniver concluded, staring at the coal of his cigar, "is the enemy before us. The only threat he can be to us is that of an urban poacher – *un braconnier de ville*."

Alexander motioned for more coffee and looked for a long time at his brother before he spoke. "And that," he said, "is enough."

July 12

Miniver was doing his midnight rounds. He passed the tiny room that served as Harwood House's chapel and was surprised to see light under the door. Not alarmed, since he was sure it was his brother on the other side, he nevertheless hesitated a moment before his sense of indiscretion drove him off.

He could not of course see Alexander, but he felt sure he was on his knees. Miniver understood not only the *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* that he could hear from the other side of the door, but the rest of the Latin as well: the priest was praying for more self-control, and for less sense of himself.

Miniver walked quietly away.

July 13

Each day Miniver had seemed more relaxed and less worried. Now he changed. He ordered a light lunch and served so little wine that not even Alexander managed a whole bottle. Ben, who was no prude, naively congratulated the others on their increasing moderation, but he was promptly rebuffed by a chorus of protestation and denial.

"Have you ever, son, seen any of us drunk?"

The young man was embarrassed. He had intended to compliment his seniors; he was not ready to criticize them and he gave the question no answer, instructive though it might have been. *Monsieur l'abbé* only smiled.

Clumsy Gérard often seized chances to second, defend or beatify his beloved boss. "Never in my life," he said solemnly to Ben, "have I seen your father abbreviated."

Ben reflected that there were different types and nuances of abbreviation, but still he kept his silence.

The priest spoke at last. "An alcoholic," he said, "is someone who drinks more than I do."

Dinner was served early: *crêpes salées* and *sucrées* and cider, no wine at all. By now the firecrackers could be heard far off, down in the village, and probably everyone had come to understand the frugality of Miniver's table: he thought even Cecil capable of profiting from the confusion and noise of the Fourteenth of July celebrations in order to carry out his attack, and the fireworks on this patriotic occasion of bloody memory were usually set off on the eve of the *fête nationale.* The Britanny food was perhaps also in honor of all the *Bretons* who died resisting that same revolution.

The men ate in calm, unusual silence and went automatically to their posts, which rotated: Ben in the tower with his monitor, Martin patrolling the North and East entrances, Miniver on the South and West entrances and Alexander in the cellars, all windows and exterior doors closed and locked. At certain early moments on their rounds Martin and Miniver could hear Gérard washing, and occasionally breaking, the dishes.

Radio silence was almost always maintained. Such duty would have been tedious, but all of them except Ben were deep in books: Miniver in English Renaissance poetry, Alexander in *Civitate Dei,* Martin in a history of the Franco-Prussian War and Gérard, once he had finished his kitchen chores and gone to his post, in a book of 1001 jokes that had him in such stitches that he was probably useless as a lookout – a harsh critic might in fact have observed that not one of the men was truly concentrated on his sentinel responsibilities. Even Ben's head was full of computer formulae, the stars above his tower and an ethereal version of his beloved's voice.

The young man produced his fountain pen and began adding to the pages of his letter to Jeanne. The house was silent even to the ticking of clocks, which had been stopped. Far in the distance, a last village *feu d'artifice* expired in the dark. The air filled suddenly with the furious honking and hissing of five very excited geese.

*

There was a routine for this eventuality, and every man followed it to the letter. Everyone broke radio silence and gave the news uselessly – each had heard it individually – to his rotating contact: Ben to Miniver, Miniver to Alexander, and so on. The danger point was electronically identified as beyond the Southwest entrance – Miniver's territory, though he could see nothing as he waited for the others, all of whom convened at that entrance, far from the windows. Only Ben stayed at his post, as the tower-monitor watch always did. The geese continued their frantic squawking.

Alexander and Gérard remained at the Southwest entrance. Miniver and Martin left by separate entrances, as far as physically possible from the focal point. Radio silence resumed. The geese stopped honking. For more than an hour, nothing stirred.

Sometime during that hour a steady drizzle of rain had begun. The absence of radio contact indicated *R.A.S. – rien à signaler* – but radio communication was obligatory every hour.

Gérard's voice crackled from the house. "I can see the geese from here. They're as silent as jays. Maybe it was a fox that unstressed them."

Miniver joined Martin at his vantage point. Both men were soaked in warm July rain. For a long time, neither spoke. Implicitly, the red alert was off. Perhaps someone, perhaps Cedric, had come and gone, scouting, hesitating, retreating. No tracks were ever found in the wet earth, but plastic bags can cover shoes. Perhaps a stag or a wild boar had come too close.

Martin broke the silence. "If I may be permitted the observation, sir, this long wait in the rain reminds me of the soldier's life: 1 % action, 10 % preparation and 90 % waiting."

Miniver was too respectful to remark upon the old man's figurative arithmetic. "Our advantage over the common soldier, Martin, consists in the fact that we are waiting amidst the pleasures of an old country house – run by you."

For a long time, silent in the rain still splattering on the summer leaves, neither man said anything. Then they turned to go back to the house, and Martin spoke.

"Thank you, sir."

July 15

The continuing rainy weather turned out to be a kind of boon to men who had few chances to go outside: goose-infested and under constant drizzle, Alix's splendid abandoned garden tempted them less. With the passage of the explosive national holiday, Miniver seemed to relax, but almost into depression.

Depression was nonetheless not a word to be applied readily to any of these men, nor would they have used it: despondency or sadness might be more apt. Miniver simply missed his wife and family. The fact was evident to everyone, even Gérard, who in his way knew his boss as well as anyone.

The master of Harwood House sat in the brilliant candlelit glimmer of his cellar, neglecting a glass of vintage cognac, not even legal in France, and did something none of the others had ever seen him do: he let a freshly lit and perfectly good cigar, a Cuban double corona, go out ignominiously in its aged wooden ashtray.

Miniver's sad head rang with Isabel's piano, with the sound of his sons singing Mozart's *Ave Verum*. He thought of his wife's lovely hands, aging in her garden. The loneliness was the more tantalizing because Alix and the children had returned from *l'Auvergne* and were staying in Paris, to profit from the beginning of the Paris empty season, or to be nearer Miniver and the others – Miniver himself could not have said which.

Ben was the first to make the suggestion. "Papa, go to Paris for a few days. It'll do you good. Man does not live by Huns alone. We'll manage everything here."

Miniver was both tempted and moved: his son had not even spoken of visiting Jeanne; he was ready to stay, and to see his father off to Paris. Miniver would not have accepted leaving his family and friends to face his personal enemy for a period of days, but he was inclining to do precisely that for just a few hours.

Alexander drove home the nail. "Why don't we call Marie and have you driven to Paris this afternoon?"

*

Alix had taken a suite in the old, distinguished and slightly dilapidated Hotel Carlin. Their apartment windows gave onto the better, *chic* part of the boulevard St-Germain, where Cecil the Hun was hardly likely to be prowling, although Miniver could not walk about freely in Paris: the danger was minor but real. The homecoming, such as it was with the Scout children missing, occurred largely, and briefly, in the hotel.

The children were simultaneously glued to their father and to *la boîte aux images* – there was no television at Harwood House, and the experience was exotic for them. Miniver looked so happy with his young children draped over his large body that Alix took several photographs of them.

Later in the evening, and as usual, Bernard solemnly punched his brother.

"Maman and Papa have disappeared," he said. Indeed, the punch would not have otherwise occurred.

Small Henri, brave and foolhardy, punched back. "They do that all the time."

Isabel was facing the screen but did not seem to be looking at it; her thoughts were elsewhere and her face was radiant. She was happy to know her parents were in love.

Mother Bee thought television stupid and had gone to bed at six o'clock. Mother Nora was delighted with the glowing box, and served as babysitter during Miniver's and Alix's long absence, although Isabel was perfectly capable of looking after her younger brothers, or at least of threatening them with tales to the parents if they went beyond her limits, such as when the boys drank all the cokes in the hotel refrigerator without conceding her share, or switched to channels 113 and 114. Whenever the children were tempted to do something strictly forbidden, they asked permission of Mother Nora, who always gave it. They never asked Mother Bee for anything.

*

The evening ended, as evenings will. Alix asked a good many questions about the situation and the preparations at Harwood House, and seemed very little reassured. Miniver changed the subject.

"Isabel," he said, taking her hand, "we were supposed to have a sort of family reunion this summer, after your brothers returned from scout camp, and now you know we can't because I have to work."

Isabel was too perceptive, and not young enough, to believe that her father was at ordinary work, but she said nothing.

"What do you say to a one-day outing in the *bois de Boulogne*? We could reserve a big private table at the *Auberge de la Forêt*, and even invite Mme. Lacrone, Josianne and Gérard." The children were all smiles.

Miniver often thought that his greatest act of love for Alix was not his letting her alone, which was probably beyond his power, but his letting her be.

*

Back at Harwood House, Miniver found waiting for him a blood-curdling, spiked dead-fall of Alexander's and Gérard's construction. Miniver suspected they had built the macabre thing mostly to amuse themselves and to tease the *maître ès lieux*, and he contented himself with giving immediate orders for its destruction. The thing seemed a sort of bloodthirsty boy scout camp project, which in a sense it was.

"You still haven't understood," he said. "We already know that our future assailant will have the advantage of surprise. But we will have the advantage of home

territory, of preparation, and" – he laughed here – "of superior intelligence. That's why the odds are three to one on us."

"Let the wasp come into the spider's web." It would have helped the others if the spider had taken the trouble to describe its web, or at least its sting.

July 17

Miniver's proposal of a day in the *bois de Boulogne* was obviously impulsive and impractical, or outright dangerous. Martin and Gérard each offered to stay at Harwood House during the *déjeuner campagnard,* though their motives and feelings were probably different.

Martin was uneasy at the idea of sitting with the family like an *intime*, and found it natural simply to continue to do his job at Harwood House. Gérard, as always, was eager to please and to serve, and to stay behind if necessary, but was also hoping hard for the refusal he got.

"You're good men, and I thank you," said Miniver, with that formality he used when speaking to thoroughly French people, and especially those in his employ.

"But consider: if our friend Cecil comes while I'm gone, and you don't neutralize him, then we will have lost and Cecil will still be at large. And if he doesn't come, it will be a pity that you missed so happy a *réunion*. In a word, I recognize with profound gratitude that you are standing loyally by me in my time of need, but I cannot accept that you put yourselves at risk in my place. This way the worst that can happen is that the house will burn – and it's not the house that Cecil is after."

Miniver was nonetheless thinking that nineteenth-century constructions in France contain more wood than most, and also that a fire was more likely if Gérard was left alone in the house.

He lightened the tone. "And you'd be missed by all the others, so you must come."

In the event, Marie and her *gendarmes* monitored the empty rooms.

*

Ben was playing more Schubert than usual on the old Érard concert grand piano, and this was a sentimental variation for him. When he began playing a version of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," his father felt obliged to act.

The aging fat man watched his blond son at the huge piano: muscular, his cheekbones sculpted and prominent, Benedict looked like and was a man. But what Miniver was feeling, and Ben was missing, moved the father the way his children always had.

When the young man finished he looked up and smiled at his father. "That was a pleasure to hear, *mon fils*." For a moment neither spoke.

"You know, Ben, I needed a break. We all do. Man does not live by Huns alone. Why don't you leave before the rest of us? You and Jeanne can arrive together, and join the party at the *Bois.*"

Ben smiled again. A few hours later, watching the young man's departure, it occurred to Miniver that Ben might have found it tactically necessary to communicate in gospel music.

July 18

"It's superstition, Martin. You know that as well as I do. It's a grotesque deformation of religion. It's not the true faith. It's magic."

The trouble with Alexander was that he became excited too easily. This was one of the reasons why, although he had long ago been regarded as a future bishop, he was still an ordinary priest.

He was now speaking of a large, gaudy, plastic statuette of St. Honoré stuck to the massive oak beam in the kitchen ceiling. St. Honoré is the patron saint of pastry-makers. Some of the saint's gold paint had disappeared, and he was covered with a thin film of kitchen grease and dust, except at his worn, white feet.

"You'd do her a service if you threw the dirty old thing into the trash." It was of course Cosette who had glued the canonized polymer to the beam. Regularly – one might almost say religiously – she touched the feet of the statue before she undertook her beloved *tartes, gateaux* and *patisseries diverses. Post hoc ergo propter hoc*: if one judged phenomena by their sequels, this was powerful plastic.

Martin, perhaps because he was being approached on marital ground, was defending himself without the deference he almost invariably reserved for his betters and for the clergy, though still with the same courtesy.

"I should have thought, *Monsieur l'abbé*, that reason does not suffice – that faith, which is mystical, is necessary too."

"And so it is, *mon cher ami*; and so it is. Neither you nor I could believe or pray in a purely reasonable fashion. We both know that reason explains only a part of human experience. But mystical faith, except in the case of a true miracle, is never incompatible with reason. You too have read St Thomas Aquinas."

"I have, *Monsieur l'abbé*."

"And you and I both also know that your wife's superb pastries have nothing to do with this silly statue."

"*Bien sûr, Monsieur l'abbé*. But my wife does not. I do not believe that the dumb ox" – it was the old abusive term Aquinas's colleagues had applied to him – "would have wished to give her pain over such a trifle – and, if I may be permitted to say so, the kind of trifle we will always have with us."

Father Alexander reflected on this for a long time, as if shocked. Slowly he began to smile his huge smile.

"You know, Martin, one of the many things I've always loved about our Church is its breadth. The Vatican is both tolerant of foibles and open to difference of interpretation. Perhaps that's why there are a billion of us, and why we've lasted two thousand years. It's certainly why I've managed to keep my vocation."

The smile continued with another pause. The teeth were large and almost white.

"Martin, sometimes I think I have no more brains than a Christian or an ordinary man. I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit. I am grateful for your correction."

Martin was embarrassed not to recognize the quotation, and embarrassed by the compliment.

"Thank you, *Monsieur l'abbé*." He spoke gravely.

"And I thank you for your *rappel à l'ordre*."

The fine, light smile of the maître d'hôtel returned. "You're welcome, *Monsieur l'abbé*."

*

The man in the tower started the silent, urgent phone chain: the infrared had detected a man-sized shape, a good half mile off but moving obliquely toward Harwood House. Miniver, Alexander and Ben were dispatched to intercept it.

The only light visible from the outside was left on, as a focal trap. Marie was immediately alerted, but asked to stand by for the moment. Messages were written onto the telephone screens, not spoken. Martin remained in the tower while Gérard patrolled the doors, all of which, like all the windows, had been equipped with alarm wires for years.

A steady rain was falling. There were moderate gusts of wind. The last message before the outside men left radio contact were Miniver's to Alexander: "Keep your *sang-froid*."

Each of the men was equipped with infrared night glasses. Alexander circled in order to approach the man from behind – it was now evident that the shape was human. Miniver and Ben spread out into what appeared to be the man's path and positioned themselves flat on the wet ground. The sound of the wind helped cover that of their movements, muffled in any case by the wet and by years of experience: as they crawled forward they removed the twigs in their paths.

There seemed to be only one man, and that man seemed wary – he appeared to be moving directly on Miniver, who nonetheless could not imagine that he was visible in forest camouflage clothing on a moonless and starless wet night. The figure moved slowly, by stops and starts. At maybe seventy yards, it stopped, raised a rifle and aimed it swiftly and directly at Miniver.

Miniver was so taken by surprise that he had no chance to anticipate fire. He rolled rapidly to the side, over and over, as he drew his pistol, fruitlessly trying at the same time to keep the man in his infrared sights. He heard the bullet thud into the earth at his side. Then he heard a sharp crackle and saw the stranger glowing like St Elmo's fire. The figure dropped in a dark heap to the ground.

*

How Alexander could have sneaked up on as skillful a *braconnier* as Gaspard, even on wet ground, was yet another facet of this surprising priest. It is true that Gaspard had never dreamt that he himself was followed: he had been utterly concentrated upon his shot at what he apparently believed was a deer, unless it was a very large wild boar that he saw in Miniver's ample silhouette.

It is also true that the priest had removed his shoes and socks, the better to feel the terrain under him and to avoid snapping twigs. And it is true that he closed the last ten paces fast, downhill, from behind, on this man who suspected nothing and was concentrating on something else. The stun gun, applied to the back of his neck, had knocked him cold. But the feat was not much less remarkable for its circumstances.

"*Trou du cul!*" shouted Miniver when he recognized their prisoner. "It isn't enough for you to poach, Gaspard? You also shoot at what you haven't identified? At least I assume you hadn't."

Gaspard *le braconnier* had never been much of talker, even in the best of times, and these, for him, were not the best. Dazed, he stared before him in silence.

Alexander, who had not recognized his victim, was impressed. "So this is Gaspard? I'm pleased to see you again, sir."

*

All cover was broken, all safeguards disrupted. It would not have been a happy moment for the arrival of Cecil himself, although it is doubtful he would have braved the flashing lights of police vehicles and the presence of blue *képis* in and around the house and the forest too. Onion and his companions had apparently recognized their old friends from the *gendarmerie*, and were feverishly pursuing them throughout the gardens.

It was certainly not a lucky moment for Gaspard *le braconnier*. He was by now coming to, though as silent as always.

Marie shook off a goose. "If I remember correctly, Miniver, 25,000 pulse-watt Taser stun guns are not available in France to private citizens. Not even to priests."

Miniver smiled. "I have permits for my handguns. Perhaps you would rather I had killed him?"

Marie smiled back. "Well, it was good work and I congratulate you all – my particular compliments to *Monsieur l'abbé*."

Miniver dodged a goose. "Nevertheless, it was a pity this had to happen, though I suppose it was inevitable."

Marie concurred. "The worst of it is Gaspard's luck. I can't think of anybody less likely to talk, but we can't take the chance. I'll have to take him in and hold him until this business is over."

There was a loud thud and a squawk, and a goose sailed toward them through the air. From the darkness could be heard Alexander's booming voice. "Well, they're supposed to fly, aren't they?"

"That's going to be hard on him. Gaspard is happy only in the forest or in his hovel."

"It won't be the first time, and it serves him right. The thing is, you know I can keep him in *garde-à-vue* only forty-eight hours. So we'll have to ask for a *comparution immédiate* and put him away for at least a month."

"I wish we could explain to him. Look at him sitting there. He still doesn't know where he is. Can he be released as soon as this is over?"

"Once you pluck Gaspard out of his forest, he never knows where he is; I'll do my best."

An hour passed, the *gendarmes* left, and everything returned to normal: to silent rain.

July 19

The *bois de Boulogne* has long had a nasty nocturnal reputation: the whole range of weird human sexual appetites is satisfied there – if such appetites can ever really be slaked. The police themselves often avoid the place.

But the daytime *bois* is a different matter. The forest is the communal garden, or *parc*, of the rich bourgeois and aristocrats who live nearby. The diurnal *bois de Boulogne* is a place of horses, lakes, fine restaurants, luxury cars and well-dressed people, not usually of the kind associated with the vulgar jet-set. It is the wonderful rose-gardens of *Bagatelle;* it is woods and greens and gentlemen rowing elegant ladies in colorful little wooden boats, aimlessly across quaint waters. It is a place of leisure and good living.

Miniver and his sixteen joyful *invités* – the four scouts had returned from their camp – took full advantage of a brilliantly sunny day even before the great lunch began. Alix was seated at a marble table in a *salon de thé* at the edge of one of the larger ponds, full of ducks, swans and, unhappily for the heroes of Harwood House, of geese. She was chatting with her beloved brother-in-law and keen to know all the details of the Harwood House adventures. He was keen to tell them.

Madame Lacrone and Josianne, as eager as Alix to hear the gossip, sat close nearby – Josianne sat so near her priest that some of the clients in the *salon de thé* were scandalized. Gérard did not quite know what to do with himself: he too would have liked to be a source of gossip but no one asked him questions. He listened to the others, on the edge of their circle, until somehow his chair collapsed, giving him something to do as he tried to fix it. Mother Bee sat alone at the end of the table and complained that the lunch was going to be late.

The five young brothers, intoxicated with the happiness of being together again, raced about on the waterlilied ponds in two paddleboats, attacking each other piratically and damaging the boats enough for the proprietor to seize the chance to require compensation from the boys' father. Mother Nora, sipping morning tea, watched her grandsons intently from her terrace chair. The boys made her smile and they often made her laugh.

Martin and his wife Cosette sat a bit stiffly at a neighboring table, ill at ease to be waited on instead of waiting on, awkward to be guests at a social gathering of their employers, but nonetheless happy to be where they were. They too were drinking tea – English breakfast tea which, Cosette not inaccurately reflected, was not quite as good as the tea she made them every day.

Jeanne and Ben appeared after the others, made friendly hellos to everyone, and disappeared on a rowboat kept carefully far from the little brothers, who would have been more than tempted to turn pirate again, and attack their big brother's *bateau d'amour*.

Isabel sat on the terrace with her father. Neither spoke. They were perfectly happy just to be together, to be with the others, to be all together. Each might perhaps have wished that such a moment could be forever.

Dogs are part of the standard paraphernalia of the *bois de Boulogne*: faithful Mountain was sleeping, or rather keeping vigil, at some distance from her mistress and her master.

Cousin Dickie was unfortunately still around. He had not wanted to come but could hardly have been left alone in the hotel, and so by chance he became this day the occasion for an impressive anecdote.

The manager of the *salon de thé* had asked that Mountain be kept on her leash; leashes are customary in France, and some of the other guests were nervous around such a large animal. The poor dog was accordingly moved, and chained to a nearby fence, where she accepted her isolation with grave humility, keeping her sad eyes fixed on distant Isabel and Miniver.

No one, however, had thought of cousin Dickie, or of the fact that in these circumstances Mountain could do nothing to escape the little tyrant. To make matters worse, the dog was off to the side and out of the view of almost everyone.

Cousin Dickie went to work with his usual assiduous nastiness, poking and distressing the dog to his heart's delight. Mountain did not yelp, though she growled

a little; mostly she bore her fate with the resigned patience she was known and admired for. Dickie knew this too, and was taking a cruel child's advantage of it.

And then there was a sharp dog's snarl, almost a roar, of a sort that could not be mistaken. It turned everyone's gaze to the dog, and filled everyone with horror. Little cousin Dickie's entire head was in the jaws of the huge animal.

For an instant no one moved – not the stunned spectators, not the dog, and least of all little Dickie, who seemed impressed with his new situation. Then Miniver began to cover the distance between himself and the unhappy duo, with that swiftness that always surprised people who did not know the fat man.

As he ran he shouted to the dog, who released Dickie's head and began looking away in guilt and fear. But Miniver paid no further attention to the animal. He took the boy's very white face in his hands to examine his injuries.

There were none at all: not even pressure marks from the teeth. Mountain had intended no harm, and had done no harm. She had simply given to little Dickie the most effective warning of his short and foolish life.

And Dickie never bothered the dog again.

*

The lunch, served at a long table in a private part of the restaurant's terrace, in the shade of several towering, twisted old acacias, was a simple summer delight. Miniver had consulted in advance with the *maître d'hôtel* and orchestrated the meal.

The children were grouped at the far end of the table. Little Dickie, whose face was now red, but who had recovered his spirits and was enjoying the extra attention, was disgusted by his cousins' meal. Since the day was blue and hot, several of them, including delicate Isabel, had chosen smoked salmon as an *entrée* and tartar steak as the *plat principal*. Dickie reflected with silent satisfaction that when he went home and told his mother that he had nearly been eaten alive by a great Mountain bitch, and that his cousins ate raw fish, raw eggs and raw ground beef, he would never have to come to this horrible place again.

Josianne was giggling and throwing little beads of bread, which she was pulling and compressing from nearby *baguettes*, at her pal Alexander. This slightly exasperated Miniver, who thought that his brother was entirely too tolerant of such foolishness, and even seemed to be enjoying it.

Miniver and Alix sat French-style, opposite each other at the middle of the table. She was wearing a minutely flowered, eggshell-blue cotton dress that her husband

found so simply beautiful that it disconcerted him. Her only jewelry was a blue *cloisonné* enamel bracelet.

Miniver was out of his suit and tie, for once: his sand-colored summer trousers, polo shirt and sandals were no doubt more a concession to the summer heat than to any new style. His gold-wired glasses gleamed like his forehead, and the open collar of his shirt exposed the great roll of fat around his neck.

Miniver often chattered or conversed with the others, but at times he just sat back and drank the old burgundy, in rather larger quantities than he had lately done, and enjoyed the spectacle of his friends and family, looking slowly from one to the other. He looked at Alix when she was looking elsewhere. The fat man was happy.

Mother Bee was speaking sharply to the hapless waiter about something no one else had noticed or bothered to understand; the poor man was abandoned to his fate. The place next to Bee had fallen as usual to Mother Nora, but Martin had been placed as far away as possible, in recognition of his *jour de fête*. He watched the unhappy waiter's confusion with compassion.

A few places down, and opposite Gérard, sat a very happy Cosette, guffawing with appreciative laughter as Gérard did his best to be *galant*. In spite of his culinary incompetence, Cosette thought Gérard was *formidable*, which is exactly what Gérard liked to be and what any man as well-intentioned as he deserved to be. Cosette said nothing about the stain on the front of his shirt.

Jeanne and Ben had again been seated side by side. At one point Ben took Jeanne's hand, before he remembered that his father had told him that such things were not done. The two of them looked as if they could be happy chained for life in a coal bin.

July 21

The men having returned to Harwood House, the ghost of military boredom loomed ever bigger, if only by contrast with the joyful outing in the *bois de Boulogne*. The shimmering evenings they spent in the candlelit cellars, the reading, the conversation, the drinking and smoking all seemed to glow less. Miniver began again to wonder if Alix wasn't right, as usual. Why linger here pointlessly with a flock of sadistic geese when he and the others could be on holiday with the rest of the family? Why not just let the *gendarmes* do their work?

One night, after a good dinner of *boudins antillais*, roast goose and onions, Alexander mumbled something about Vatican II's music being unworthy of a whorehouse.

"Maybe not everything of worth," said Ben, "is old."

The priest, surprised at unwonted sharpness in his nephew, defended himself humbly with Martial:

Sunt bona, sunt quaedam mediocria, sunt malo plura ...

"In fact, you're right, Ben. Your father and I give the little we have to give – I'm not speaking in false modesty. There are things still to be done in the Church, perhaps more than ever. Maybe one day you'll agree with more of what we think we see, but blithely I count on you and people like you for the Church's future."

A silence ensued. The priest turned to his brother, lifted his glass, drank and wiped his mouth with his white napkin. One of his eyes looked sad, the other hard and lucid.

"You and I," he said to Miniver, "are museum pieces."

*

One night a stag set off the alarm system and the same routine that had trapped Gaspard; Miniver and Ben had their hands full preventing Alexander from trying to shoot the animal. The incident had the advantage of bringing variety into the men's lives. Nonetheless, in spite of the stag, boredom now dominated.

Alexander and Ben argued sporadically about Heisenberg and the uncertainty principle: the priest took quantum mechanics to be proof of the existence of God. Ben did not disagree, but silently thought his uncle knew less about quantum theory than God.

Once again, in their shimmering cellar, Miniver quoted J. V. Cunningham:

All in due time: love will emerge from hate,
And the due deference of truth from lies.
If not quite all things come to those who wait
They will not need them: in due time one dies.

July 25

Josianne telephoned. She spoke quickly, and in French. "I'm not sposed to do this and I hope I won't regret it for the resta my life. But I know you got more confidence in yourself than you do in the police in general. One of our contacts at the *préfecture* just called and said that the special services think they know where Cecil is. Neither the *police* nor the *gendarmerie*" – she was speaking of the two rival French forces – "need to know till tomorrow."

"Thank you, Josianne." He paused to think. "If I have the choice, I may prefer to be the attacker – not the attacked."

Until now he had had no hope of such a possibility. It did not occur either to Josianne or to Miniver that such a preference was inconsistent with his calculations of the odds.

*

Arrête ! C'est ici l'empire de la mort.

Paris is a triple city: the famous one on the top and, below its fascinating surfaces, two intermingling reproductions, one for the sewers, and one for the catacombs. The one on the top is the best of the three, but if you must go below, the catacombs are better than the sewers. The catacombs are where, apparently, Cecil had inadvertently led the two brothers.

"Catacombs" is a misnomer in Paris: they were not originally funereal, much less places of celebration or of rendezvous, and they were never specifically Christian. They were simple stone quarries. As Paris was hollowed out beneath itself, and up above its cemeteries overflowed, it was logical – and, in spite of their reputation, the French are nothing if not logical – that the emptied quarry space be used.

The old quarries were used as a depository for old bones, and so they became the catacombs: the average dead had the right to a generation or so under their tombstones and their names, and then to centuries in the communal *galéries:* row upon row, line upon line, wall after wall, kilometers of skulls and bones. It required a certain skeletal dispersion, but all in all it was probably a better deal than most people get now.

The whole business illustrates the French genius for administrative order. Instead of an ordinary, promiscuous, run-of-the-mill pile of bones, tibia here are neatly stacked into robust and effective walls with other tibia, femurs with femurs, and skulls with skulls – so there are tibia walls, and femur walls, and skull walls, which are the most impressive of all.

Les catacombes de Paris have been penetrated, used and modified by *la pègre, le demi-monde* and the general riff-raff of the capital for centuries. They are also something of a fetish for the fashionable people: students from France's elite institutions of higher learning, *les grandes écoles*, hold celebrations in them. The catacombs are of such complexity that the police – in Paris, it is *la police*, and not *les gendarmes*, who are in charge – find it impossible to track people down once they're in, or to close all the possible points of access, to keep them out.

Depending on one's mood, a French Administration of Skulls and Bones might well provoke hilarity. But these were human bones, lined up in long murky galleries that meander under the streets of Paris like a pale parody. Even aside from the danger of Cecil's possible proximity, neither Alexander nor Miniver felt amused.

The quarry galleries inevitably interconnect with the sewer system, and the sewers follow the lines of the streets and even have address plaques: *2 bis, rue Barté; 127, rue des Quatre diamants*, and so on. The tip the men had received indicated a vague "chamber" – number 328 – off *la rue de Saintonge*, not far from the famous grave whose plaque brought them to a halt:

A la mémoire de
Philibert Aspairt, portier du Val-de-Grâce,
perdu dans cette carrière
le III novembre MDCCXCIII
retrouvé onze ans après
et inhumé en la même place
le XXX avril MDCCCIV

Poor Philibert was waning just when the Great Organizer himself, Napoléon Bonaparte, was beginning to wax; the porter had discovered, as the emperor would, that it is easier to enter than it is to leave.

The fat man and the priest stopped to take counsel. They were already too close to Cecil's "address" for complete comfort, although the number of intersections and side galleries in this bony gloom was such that they were unlikely to encounter anyone alive.

Alexander, of course, was all for crashing into the hideaway; Miniver, of course, was opposed.

"I have no intention of usurping police functions, Alexander." This was disingenuous: Miniver was already usurping police functions. Perhaps what he meant was that he intended to usurp them only a little, that he didn't want to ruin his

excellent relations with both *la police* and *la gendarmerie* by going too far, and that he expected his brother would indeed, if given the chance, go too far.

If Miniver was usually less impulsive, or less ebullient, than his big brother, he was also correspondingly more perspicacious and circumspect – someone had once called him "the Master of the Circumspect." He knew that if they crashed into what they assumed was Cecil's hideaway they would, at worst, be killed themselves. Even given better luck, it was entirely possible that, entering an unknown zone of the *catacombes*, they would fail to catch Cecil, who might not even be there at the time. In that case they would have alerted him, and advantage would be lost.

So Miniver astutely channeled his brother's enthusiasm in another direction – a congenial one, since it involved risk and *bravoure*: Alexander, who was unknown to Cecil, would enter the chamber, disguised as a more or less criminal, drug-taking fellow traveler. If Cecil was there, Alexander was to explain that he had stumbled upon the place – *les drogués* often lingered in the catacombs – and wanted to buy drugs. He was not to act against Cecil if he could avoid it – that was still, in principle, for the police – but of course he would go in armed.

Although he was neither, it was not difficult to make the huge, black-bearded, shaggy priest look like a criminal and a drug-taker. A tear in his shirt – he had dressed, exceptionally and on purpose, in lay clothing – a bit of mud and some tousled hair were all that was necessary.

The priest walked toward the chamber with confidence and apparent insouciance; Miniver watched from outside, pistol drawn, with apprehension.

Alexander did not knock because there was no door to knock on, but he called drunkenly out several times. The place was a sort of long gallery with several openings: as Miniver had feared, it would have been impossible to trap anyone there.

The priest crashed into a wall and called out again. "*Y'a quelqu'un*?"

Like his brother, he spoke French with no accent, or rather with whatever accent he chose; he would in fact have been hard put to identify his mother tongue. Something moved in the dark corner.

"*Y'a quelqu'un*?"

The something in the dark corner took on the shape of a pile of rags, then of a man, but it did not stand up.

"Who the hell are you?" said the shape.

Alexander let a short silence intervene. "*Merde*, you scared me."

The dark shape said nothing.

"*Salut*." More silence.

Alexander broke it again. "*T'as pas de l'héro?*" It was the slang word for heroin.

More silence, then an answer. "*Non*."

"I can pay."

"Don't have none."

At this point Alexander went beyond his mission, as he loved to do, or at least often did: he used Cecil's name.

"And Cecil – has he got any?"

Miniver would have been furious at this indiscretion, which could easily have tipped or scared off their prey, but he was not near enough to hear it. The ploy worked, at least for the moment.

"Cecil's gone."

Alexander gambled again. "I left some needles here someplace. You seen 'em?"

"No."

Alexander began to look around. He spoke casually. "When did Cecil leave?"

"Dunno. Couple days ago."

Alexander turned his flashlight on the dark gallery. There was almost nothing human, or at least attractively human, in sight: some broken bottles, plastic and paper trash everywhere, half-eaten food. The only wall of bones here was at the far end of the gallery.

Still on his guard – he could not yet be sure that the shape in the corner was not Cecil himself – Alexander kept his light off the dark mass. For fear of betraying himself, he made no effort to keep his hand near his pistol: if the man was Cecil, he had small reason yet to suspect the anonymous priest.

"You know when he's comin' back?"

"He's gone."

The priest wandered further down the gallery, his back now turned to the dark shape. All he found was more trash and filth, and a not-very-freshly killed small dog, which showed signs of having been tortured. He turned the dog over with his foot. The underside swarmed with maggots. So Cecil had indeed been gone for a couple of days.

July 26

Alexander, Miniver and Ben were playing cards, drinking Jamaican arabica coffee, quoting poems and smoking the best cigars in the world as consolation for not being able to drink as a man should, or could. Gérard was upstairs in the Little Kitchen, baking some of his celebrated banana bread, Martin was on tower duty and the others were complaining that you cannot play a good game of poker with only three hands.

Subsequent intelligence from *les services de renseignements* confirmed that the tip on Cecil had come too late, that he had indeed left the catacombs. The men were back to zero.

There was a loud detonation upstairs. It made the radio chain difficult, since communication was supposed to be initiated by the person who first detected something. Miniver reached Martin on his own channel; Martin confirmed the absence of infrared detection or trip-wired entry, and said the explosion had occurred somewhere below him.

All the men drew their handguns and spread away from each other. Gérard did not respond.

The men felt trapped. The man in the tower had not warned them, the geese had not warned them and, huge as the cellars were, the single stone stairway was the only way out. Anyone waiting for them up there could pick them off like ducks, or geese. But there was nothing to do but move.

Alexander was as usual ready to go first, but Miniver pre-empted him. The priest and Ben remained in separate parts of the cellars while Miniver, pistol in hand, went up the steps quietly, which was easy to do on stone.

Fortunately the door opened out. He kicked it open, ran to the far part of the dark room – the rooms were generally kept dark, though in the future there would be a remote-control system for turning the lights suddenly on – and threw himself onto

the floor, knocking over a small, precious eighteenth-century table and its lamp and looking frantically around him, knowing that the noise betrayed his position.

Nothing, no one.

Now preferring the dark, he ran into the next room and went down behind a heavy Louis XIII oak chest, just the thing for stopping bullets. Nothing. Silence.

He radioed Alexander and Ben and told them to come up, locking the cellar door behind them: from where he was, Miniver could cover their entrance. Each man entered separately, standing, and moved quickly to different parts of the room. No attempt was made to come together. The men stayed in radio contact only.

In keeping with their procedures, Martin stayed in the tower. Miniver risked a few sharp calls to Gérard, moving fast to another place in the dark as soon as he cried out Gérard's name. Silence.

He approached the kitchen and saw a light, as would have been expected, since Gérard had been baking there. He called again, moving sharply away as he did so.

No answer.

There was only one entrance to this room, which served as a kind of second kitchen; it was not the huge chamber in which Cosette prepared her quotidian masterpieces. The Little Kitchen had no windows, which made it ideal for light without danger at night. Miniver placed Alexander and Ben outside, and went in.

Gérard was standing off to one side. It was only a few instants later, when Miniver finished scanning the room, that he had time to speak to Gérard, or to look at him. He was swaying vaguely on his feet. He did not speak. His face and hands were unnaturally white.

The sight of this silent, white, unresponsive man – Miniver could hardly recognize him – scared the devil out of Miniver, or put the fear of God into him, according to preference.

"Ben, stay outside on guard! Alexander, come in here!"

Alexander entered and seemed as astonished as his brother.

Miniver spoke. "Gérard?"

Gérard, still swaying, smiled vaguely and mumbled something incomprehensible.

*

It took them some time to understand what had happened. Gérard had been baking his banana bread in the gas oven. On schedule, he checked his bread and then left the Little Kitchen to do his patrol rounds, checking all the doors and windows of the ground floor and the upper floor of Harwood House.

When he came back – the rounds took a good deal of time in a very large house – he opened the door of the oven to check the progress of his bread, and was surprised to find the oven almost cold: the flame had gone out, as in fact it often did.

Gas is of course the best source of cooking heat, but an old ramshackle gothic house in the forest has no access to the city variety. The big underground propane gas tank system had long suffered from corrosion, and let air into the pipes from time to time; the air pockets blew out the flame, including the pilot light.

Gérard had found nothing better to do than to light a match and put it into the hole that had contained the pilot light. The consequent huge blue ball of noise and fire flung him all the way across the room, slamming his back against the kitchen counter and almost breaking it. When the men reached him he was simply in shock.

*

No one considered Gérard's condition alarming: they all had experience with men in shock, and knew it would pass, bringing in its wake whatever pain there was to be felt. In Gérard's case this meant an aching back and a burning hand; in the following days he would lose all the skin on his right hand and arm.

Such minor injuries were not enough to keep them from recruiting him for their poker game, where, to everyone's surprise and to his painful delight, he won heavily.

Not much in keeping with state-of-the art burn therapy, Gérard's arm was coated in oils and wrapped in gauze. Miniver looked at his faithful, incompetent deputy with a sort of tenderness, happy to see his accumulating winnings, even if they came in part from Miniver's own pocket. "Things have become so boring here, Gérard, that if it wasn't for your scorched arm I'd thank you for the diversion."

Gérard looked, in his constant desire to please, a little confused, although it might be thought that this was not much different from his usual state.

"You shouldn't thank me for what I didn't do on purpose." It was not clear whether he was being humble, or defending himself.

Alexander put down his cards. "I call."

Ben drained his crystal tumbler; even he had accepted a splash of whisky after Gérard's *aventure*. He looked at the myriad white and green candles, glimmering everywhere.

"If not quite all things come to those who wait," he misquoted, "it will not matter; in due time one dies."

July 27

The message came with the speed and simplicity of most such messages: Marie was dead.

Renseignements and the *gendarmerie* had found Cecil again, this time in an abandoned, half-*squatté* industrial complex in Esthère-St-Pierre, a small grey town about forty kilometers from Paris – in the direction of Harwood House, which suggested incidentally that Cecil was beginning his approach.

The *gendarmes* had surrounded the buildings. Perhaps it had been a mistake not first to summon Cecil by bullhorn, or use teargas, but there were a number of other people in the immediate area who could not safely be evacuated. In the event, at dusk, the *gendarmes* went in for him, and Marie was the first of them.

Whether because they had been warned or because they sensed police presence, Cecil and, apparently, a single companion were waiting. They detonated a grenade in the *gendarmes*' path; it stunned and injured Marie and two of her men. Shots were exchanged. In the resulting smoke, dust and confusion, Cecil took the dazed Marie hostage and disappeared into some other part of the disaffected buildings.

In such a sprawling ruin, interspersed with terrified people, it took the *gendarmes* nearly thirty minutes to find their *capitaine*.

Her hands were bound behind her back with metal wire. Her throat had been cut. Cecil and his companion had already escaped.

July 31, 10 am

Father Alexander, stark in black and gold requiem robes, listened to the *dies irae* with tears in his eyes. In the *choeur* of the church a small orchestra, put together hastily for Marie's funeral, accompanied the voices of Ben and Isabel, and the clear, delicate, anguished voice of Bernard. Knowing that in a traditional church only men and boys sing sacred music, the priest himself had requested the singing of his niece. The music echoed off the flaking, saltpetered thirteenth-century walls.

Miniver was still too overwhelmed to think clearly or to say much, which hardly mattered, since Marie's husband and children and her fellow *gendarmes* were in the same state. In the years to come, Miniver and his family would remain close to M. Liège and his children, whose schooling Miniver would provide for. The poetic line

I, who have no rights in this matter, neither parent nor lover

rang in his old head.

Blinking, the priest turned to face the people crowding the church, and prepared to say to them whatever it was he could find to say.

Later, Isabel, Ben, Bernard and their fellows sang the same Mozart notes that had been sung and played thousands of times, over centuries, for people they did not know, and which would be sung again in the future for the yet unborn:

Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat ei.

When he gave his brother communion, the priest paused and looked at him, whose eyes were closed. He whispered the words "Corpus Christi."

Alexander had, in the days preceding the funeral, consoled his brother as he could. He had even quoted Miniver's own ancient sundial: *omnes vulnerant, ultima necat:* every hour injures, and the last one kills. Now he tried to keep his mind not on Miniver or his family or even on Marie and hers, but on the Mass he was celebrating and the mystery he was ritualizing:

Thy will be done.

August 3, 2.25 am

A gigantic summer thunderstorm was breaking over the forest and over Harwood House: violent wind, huge gusts of rain, lightning and stunning thunder. Because of the storm, or for whatever reason, all electrical power was down.

Cecil the Hun, large, thick-necked, his head shaven, pushed his car off the road, into the forest brush, several kilometers from Harwood house. In the frequent giant flashes of lightning, his companion's face suggested someone both drugged and drunk, but Cecil's eye seemed hard and concentrated. They walked on the clumps of grass at the side of the muddy forest road. There was no one in sight.

The two men had flashlights but rarely needed to use them, since the old white road signs could easily be read in the lightning. When they arrived at the house, they drew their weapons and circled it. With the electricity off, there was no light anywhere. The rain ran off Cecil's bald skull.

The storm subsided. Except for the still-drizzling rain, there was no sound, not even of geese. The lightning had ceased and the two figures were lost in obscurity. Cecil tried several doors and found them locked, and then a back door, which opened.

For a moment, Cecil and his companion, who did not speak, stood motionless inside, out of the fading storm, orienting themselves. The sound of voices and music drew their attention to a massive door and to a thin, irregular line of pale light under it.

Cecil stepped forward, turned the iron door-handle slowly, making a little noise, and opened the door a crack, which made more noise. He paused. A flood of music and shimmering light, surprising the intruders, came out of the doorway at them. A large stone stairway led down to what appeared to be some kind of cellar.

For a few moments the two men hesitated. Then the sounds and laughter grew louder, and Cecil recognized Miniver's voice. Their firearms in hand, Cecil and his companion began to move slowly down the old stone steps.

3.32 am

The rain had stopped and the storm could not be heard even in the distance. From somewhere in the dripping forest came the cry of a screech owl. From inside the old walls of the house came a loud thud, and then total silence. The owl screeched again, and flew away. Far in the distance, a fox barked.

4.35 am

After considering the question for some time, Miniver had decided that he could not trust himself even to see Cecil, much less physically to approach him. But just before the *gendarmes* took away the two manacled men in their blue *gendarmerie* vehicles, Miniver changed his mind.

He was almost too late: the two prisoners were climbing into the police van.

"Cecil!" Miniver's voice was so unexpected, and so sharp in the night, that everyone froze. Alexander and Ben were on either side of him.

No doubt still distrusting himself, Miniver stopped at a distance. There was a long silence; no one moved. If only because they themselves were entertaining similar ideas, several of the *gendarmes* tensed, expecting their boss's old friend to open fire on their prisoners.

The fat man's voice was trembling a little. "I'm sorry to have complicated your life, Cecil; I'm afraid you're going to have to wait a long time before coming to see me again. Given an increased sentence for escape and murder, it'll be a very long time. But I'll try to live long enough for the event."

And Miniver turned away, afraid that Cecil might see the tears in his eyes.

August 6, *before dinner*

Some days later the entire family and Miniver's Paris team were once again preparing to assemble at the long old oak Harwood House table, which none of them had ever wanted to leave. Josianne had been busy, and perfectly happy, giggling and squealing at the priest's *histoires drôles*, many of which seemed not at all clerical, but now Alexander left off flirting and playing the clown and turned to more serious conversation, or description.

Miniver was off walking alone in his beloved wife's beloved gardens. Some of those present had not yet heard the full story of what had happened – Miniver had been sparing of detail – and this gave Alexander a chance, not to brag, but to hold center stage, while saying things that clearly needed to be said. With a little brother like Miniver, this had not always been his fate.

Not everyone was listening. Ben and Jeanne were too deeply gone in each others' eyes to attend to a story they already knew. Cosette was lost in her kitchen, preparing a dinner of *oies rôties aux trois purées*, this time, fortunately, without the help of her friend Gérard. Mother Bee was complaining loudly about something; no one was paying attention, except her smiling, aged companion, whose good humor was exacerbating the complainer's fury. There was general hilarity and good cheer almost everywhere else in this large room, and old Mother Bee never had a chance.

The priest spoke slowly, appreciatively, to the faces turned attentively to him. Although she had already heard the story fully, Alix was fixed on every word and full of questions: she had always been a *connaisseur du détail*. The young children were riveted. Martin and Mme. Lacrone were too discreet, and Martin too impassive, to show either an excess of interest or a lack of it, but they were listening carefully too. Gérard, full of admiration for his boss, was waiting to hear the story again.

“He knew, you see,” said Alexander, “that everything Cecil had ever done was done at night – the rapes, the murders, the burglaries of course, and even the escape. Cecil has the nature of a poacher, and a poacher comes alive only at night. So he gambled pretty heavily on a night visit.”

Martin poured a fourth glass of champagne for a blissful Gérard.

Alexander continued. “He couldn’t be sure it would do the trick, of course. Cecil might not have been fooled, or he might have left someone outside on watch. So he needed those dreadful geese and the tripwires and the infrared, and we all needed to keep our pistols at the ready.”

The priest put down his small crystal glass.

“And naturally he couldn’t tell us about his plan, because he wanted to keep all of us on full alert. Only Ben and he knew the whole thing. Not even I knew, and he was right not to tell me.”

Several of his listeners silently concurred with the impulsive priest on this point, quite beyond what Alexander would have considered strictly necessary.

Martin refilled Alexander’s glass with old amber-colored port. It had been a long time since they had been able to drink properly.

“But it did the trick.” Alexander raised his glass in the direction of Miniver, who could be seen at the far end of the garden; the priest’s eyes were shining with pride, admiration and affection.

“To Ockham’s razor – to simple solutions, which are the best. Especially when they’re simple and brilliant.”

From where he was seated, Alexander watched his brother’s solitary silhouette in the garden, passing the huge, ancient acacia trees. He spoke a little wistfully.

“But I must say I’m sorry that my little brother wasn’t able to come up with something more dramatic.”

He smiled, and reflected that joy and grief often live together.

“Ben, needless to say, did all the electronics. The doors and windows were already rigged. He completed the radio system and set up the cameras and monitors. He did a very good job.”

Ben was not so lost in his beloved's eyes as to be unaware of his uncle's praise, which in fact seemed to give greater pleasure to Jeanne.

"We checked the cellar door. It was old and utterly unbreakable – must be six inches thick. And there were no other exits at all, except an old coal chute we cemented. Ben did the recordings for the cellar, and the automatic closing and locking mechanism as well. The thing closed like a tomb in about one second, with almost no advance warning sound."

Martin moved swiftly and silently about the room, filling glasses. He was busy and happy.

Alexander glanced at Alix. "The night Cecil came, Ben and his father saw it all on TV. We had back-up power sources. The storm made no difference."

"Monsieur de Toulon, his old friend, gave his permission immediately, of course. They didn't have to do much there. None of this was complicated."

Alexander lifted his polished glass: "To the baron de Toulon; may this incident be the end of the Toulon curse."

He drank, and put it down. "The dogs were simply sent to a kennel."

"We were surprised to see him taking those mysterious solitary morning and evening walks – especially to see him up so early. We thought it was because he was nervous, which he no doubt was. In fact, of course, Miniver was reversing the road signs: every night he fixed the Harwood House signs to point to Toulon's place, and Toulon's signs to point to Harwood House. And every morning, in case some delivery person might come in, or the word get about, he changed them back."

*

Miniver returned, the subject changed, the great dinner took place. The silver clattered on the china, rare old burgundy gurgled in engraved lead crystal. Cosette and Martin were constantly busy serving. Josianne, seated again near her priest, resumed her delighted squeals.

The meal came to an end over another round of Cosette's *crème brulée* and everyone moved to the library for coffee. Isabel sat by her father, listening, saying nothing, as happy as he was to be near. Cigars were smoked later, to the sound of the children's singing and of Ben's harpsichord.

Very late that evening, when everyone else had gone to bed, Miniver would go for another long solitary walk in Alix's gardens, and smoke another cigar; he would

think of his wife, and he would think of Marie, as he had constantly since her death, and he would listen to the barking of the roedeer and the foxes in the night.

But for now he turned his cigar slowly around and was satisfied to see it alight in perfect symmetry. He was holding a snifter of old cognac in his palm, to warm it. He pulled on his cigar, glanced again at Alix, and smiled.

THE VILLAGE
The Tale of the Terrible Things that Occurred in the Beautiful Village of Fleuré, in Picardy

Chapter 1: Getting to Know Your ABCs

A middle-aged woman muttered some sharp French words of exasperation and ran into a smoky kitchen.

"Saperlipopette! Et merde!"

In spite of her unusual ugliness, the woman would have been non-descript had she not been so badly attired that one might have assumed she dressed that way on purpose. Ordinary people dress badly and forgettably; Mme. Radis had a genius for dressing badly and memorably.

"O putain!"

"Really, Radish! Contain yourself!" The stone house was long and large and the second voice came from afar. It did not suggest the age of its proprietor.

The widow Marius was in fact paying very little attention to either the *gros mots* or the smoke, now billowing out of high kitchen windows and into a brilliant summer

garden, obscuring yellow roses. She was concentrating on her presentation, to an attractive red-haired young lady, of the wonders and subtleties of two of her many favorite subjects: the French language and France. But since she was naturally given to simultaneity, the old lady found time to quarrel with her house-maid amidst an explanation of the spelling and pronunciation of the words necessary to the understanding of a French cathedral. And since she was speaking softly to the pretty young woman in English, and shouting at the ugly maid in French, the confusion was exacerbated.

"The center aisle – what you call in English, I believe, the nave – *je suis désolée,* Radish, I completely forgot the *gâteaux* – in French is of course called the *nef.* Curiously, the word had originally to do with boats. *Ouvrez les fenêtres* and stop cursing like a fishmonger!"

Mme. Arthur Marius, seated blithely on the sofa of the *petit salon* with her young lady, checked the latter's still-nearly-full glass and poured herself a second small crystal receptacle of *fino* sherry. The glass and the old lady had a good deal in common: they were small, they were fine, and each gave off an impression of brilliance and clarity. The latter had spent a great part of her life with the former.

In spite of her age and a head too large for her small body, Elisabeth Marius was what a discerning observer would not have hesitated to call beautiful. Her skin was smooth and unspotted, rather dark. Her nose was aquiline, her forehead almost too broad. Her hair was of a black, wiry, voluminous kind common among the French; it had never, however, turned completely white, remaining at the mixed stage of black strands mixed with silver that the French call *sel et poivre.* She did not suffer from contrast with the girl at her side.

Holding her glass by its stem, the old widow showed rather more enthusiasm for its amber contents than is respectable, or conventional, in someone of her sex and age, though she might well have been amused had anyone pointed this out to her. She knew she tended to drink too much; she defended herself, for what it was worth, with the thought that she never drank *much* too much.

To complete the confusion filling the house at this moment – if by its nature confusion can ever be called complete – the jocund voices of several men filtered into the *petit salon* from the doorway on the other side of the room.

"M. Toppe!" said the old lady. "I am afraid tea will be late. Perhaps you and your colleagues would care for some other drink?" The offer was met with laughter and noisy approval. The widow excused herself and went off to the Music Room, where she had "installed," as the French say, the men in question for their tea.

Not one of the four men was dressed in traditional French workers' blue coveralls, and each seemed as different from the others as he could reasonably be. Léon Toppe, whom his hostess had addressed, was apparently the boss, and apparently dressed as he thought a boss should dress. He wore a cheap but traditional three-piece suit that gave his handlebar mustaches an even more British air, though he was as French as all his *collaborateurs*. He accepted a glass of whiskey. He laughed too much and too heartily and never seemed to look anyone in the eye.

Ernest Ohrdre was wearing a clean white lab coat, drinking water and looking directly at another man whom everyone called "Ferrari." Ferrari was wearing the hideous garb that so often embellishes a salesman: a black polyester shirt and a pink blazer with large black-and-gold pseudo-royal insignia on the outer breast pocket. It was the sort of outfit that might have impressed a half-sober *shampooineuse* in a suburban discothèque, or perhaps Mme. Radis. He had asked for beer, and was arguing with Ernie about the proper color for a Ferrari.

Ferrari maintained that the original color of the sports car was red. Ernie said they all used to be yellow, and that was why the Ferrari emblem was yellow still. There was in their quarrel something that went beyond the colors of sports cars; even a casual observer would have noticed the antipathy the men felt for each other, and would have been unable to explain it.

"Anyway," said Ernest, maneuvering for the last word, "an old beat-up BMW is no Ferrari."

It was Ferrari's sorry fate no longer to own the car after which he was knick-named. He did what he could, but what he could, at this time of his life in any case, was an old wreck. It was in fact difficult to imagine him ever being prosperous enough to own a rich man's car.

In a silent gesture of consolation, Mme. Marius passed him his bottle of beer. He drank it gratefully, ignoring the glass she had also provided. Ferrari reminded her of certain American boys she had known during childhood vacations in Virginia, and this made her rather fond of the man. He had a kind of absolute, innocent charm. Some would have called it ignorant charm; Elisabeth Marius would not have insisted upon the distinction.

The fourth man was standing at a grand piano, managing nonetheless to play snatches of Bach keyboard compositions and Broadway songs, and adding his own sort of musical confusion to the smoke, the curses from backstage and the mixture of languages. His glass of thick liquid had already been emptied, placed not on the piano but on a small table to the side, and forgotten.

Camille Peter Richard Cointreau was strikingly good-looking. He was at the time wearing beige cotton trousers and a white poplin shirt, the collar of which was concealed by surprising long, curling golden hair – hair which appeared to be real, even to its color.

"How well you play, M. Cointreau," said Mme. Marius. "Do sit down and give us more Bach."

Camille Cointreau smiled and began a little prelude, mumbling something about preferring to stand. Ernie and Ferrari stopped quarrelling long enough to snigger.

Camille continued at the piano when the French doors leading from the Music Room to the large flower-filled gardens were opened by an extraordinarily attractive, middle-aged woman, but all the other men stopped what they were doing in order to stare. For a moment, the very confusion in the house seemed suspended.

"Belle!" said her hostess. "I'm happy to see you!" The informality of the first lady's entrance and the second's greetings suggested they knew each other well.

Elisabeth Marius briefly introduced the four men to Madame Légère, whose eye had fixed upon Camille before she was well across the threshold. The other men would have been happy to know that Mme. Légère was in fact the divorcée Légère, and they would have been outright delighted to be told that she was, by her complete title, the triple-divorcée Légère. They would have been further interested to know that Belle Légère was wearing expensive clothes because she was indeed rich. But the widow offered none of these tidbits to the men with their substitute tea. They considered themselves lucky to be introduced at all.

Although her features were classical, it was in part Mme. Légère's bright eyes, and a certain vivacity and elegance suffused in her whole person, that made her so very attractive. Mme. Marius called for champagne, which is all her guest usually drank.

"M. Toppe is the President of a small company he calls ABC. Perhaps you've heard of it. He and his colleagues have come to our village to dehumidify our poor, damp stone houses. They've been working all day on the sorry stone vault of my own wine-cellar."

It was difficult to know whether Mme. Légère took account of these words. She had drifted off to the side of the pianist and appeared lost in his music, or in his handsome face. The other men, for their part, continued to stare; Ernie and Ferrari had left their quarreling. None of this was very discreet, but no one seemed to mind: the men, no doubt, because they knew no better, and Mme. Légère because she was used to it.

Mme. Radis entered in her stained tennis shoes, plaid turquoise trousers and patterned orange top. Mme. Marius noticed that, as usual, her hands were as clean as her shoes were not.

Mme. Légère left her beautiful pianist at the sound of the champagne cork – an auditory feat, given the fact that the parti-colored servant had opened the bottle *à la française*: almost without noise or foam.

"How did you get to know these people?" She spoke to her hostess in a muted voice, as subtle as the champagne cork. "They don't look like workers."

Her hostess poured the champagne herself, expertly down the angled sides of the narrow glasses: she would not leave her guest to drink champagne alone, and had nothing against the "mixing" of drinks.

"They came to me. They have some sort of newfangled 'dampness detector' and they go from door to door, offering free analyses. I should think they'll have great success in a humid village like Fleuré. I just hope they're not going to want to stick those dreadful little plastic aerators into the stone foundations."

Belle Légère sipped her champagne reflectively. "An accomplished pianist, that man Camille. In his overdone way, he's a genuine *beau garçon*."

Mme. Radis had refilled her mistress' crystal glass with sherry. Having emptied her champagne *flute,* the old lady held the smaller glass idly in her hand while she considered the gorgeous pianist. She was moved by the Bach prelude he had begun to play.

When she answered her friend's comment, it was with a lowered voice.

"Ce n'est pas possible, ma chère."

*

Newcomers, and perhaps especially foreigners, are often easier to talk to than intimates. During the ABC musical interlude, Mme. Radis, eyes and clothes still flashing, had been trying to calm down by pouring out her heart to the new American visitor.

"She do not want me cooking and she burn every sing. Sat is er *spécialité* – burn sea food and burn sea food." Mme. Radis looked up from her monologue with the young lady, saw that her employer had returned, scowled, and walked away. The two widows had been together for more than twenty years.

Burnt and overcooked food were indeed something of a specialty for the mistress of the house. In fact the lady had a gift for cooking, or at the least a subtle appreciation of good food. She had on occasion achieved some noted successes. But her mind wasn't simple enough – or, perhaps, when it came to *la cuisine,* not passionate or single-minded enough – to fix on one lone culinary phenomenon. There were also times when she drank more than was good for her recipes. Her thoughts wandered to other subjects, like chess, flowers, the neighbors, Latin, mathematics and the birds in the garden. On good days the neglected dish was only overcooked, but overcooking is a *faute grave* in France.

In English, Mme. Marius presented the young American to Mme. Légère, explaining that Alexandra was a remote grand-niece who had just arrived from the United States for an extended stay in France, as a student of French culture and the French language. The aunt did not say, as later she would to her Parisian friend, that the young lady was the offspring of a *famille brouillée,* with whom no one in the family had been on speaking terms for more than a generation. The poor, monolingual child was only now emerging from a lifetime in darkest Upstate New York.

Three of the ABC workers in the next room were now jostling to get better glimpses of the two younger women. The men were more clumsy than discreet in their efforts, which must have amused all three women, but they acted is if they noticed nothing.

Instinctively Mme. Légère considered her potential rival. This young gold-haired Alexandra was not only tall and beautiful: she appeared to combine the best characteristics of the Americans with the best of the French. Worse, she did so unconsciously.

The girl stood and greeted her new acquaintance with a very pretty smile, but did not immediately become familiar, as so many of her compatriots do. She spoke haltingly, but in rather better French than Belle would have expected – and she had chosen to speak in French. After an instant's hesitation, Mme. Légère took the offered handshake with warmth. The beautiful divorcée had never been petty. She decided to like this young American, however good-looking she was.

*

The men's alcoholic tea continued, and the ladies drifted back to the Music Room. Camille continued to play at the old Érard piano, paying attention to a second glass just long enough to empty it. A certain calm, perhaps an awed calm, descended upon the other men, who were now reduced to watching and awkward smiling at the ladies moving amidst the music.

Belle Légère had not returned to the piano but had migrated toward and was now in lively conversation with Léon Toppe, though the latter's part in the liveliness seemed to consist mostly of a certain red-faced pseudo-British heartiness. The triple divorcée, sensitive to such things (she had each time married a little further up), thought she detected in the President of ABC a few vestiges of superior milieu. Léon Toppe worked hard to give that impression, and it was not so very far from the truth.

*

When Mme. Radis ushered in the new guest, the visual effect was striking: Brilliant Ugliness leading the Unspeakable Ordinary. The brightly-colored maid announced Mlle. Plaine, turned on her still angry dirty purple running shoe heels, and disappeared, leaving timid in the doorway a sad sort of person no one would remember an hour later.

Had Mlle. Gorgonzola Plaine (her father was a half-Italian sadist) been any greyer and more non-descript, she would have frightened people. Her only remarkable feature, other than that of having no remarkable features, was fairly exceptional height. As it was, those around her hesitated between not noticing her, and ignoring her. She stood immobile, vaguely masculine, dowdy and silent in the doorway, where she had been abandoned.

Mme. Marius went quickly to her. "*Ah, Mlle. Plaine! Comment allez-vous?* You'll be here to see M. Toppe." To this the grey woman mumbled assent. "Perhaps you would care to join us for a drink?"

Mlle. Plaine looked more alarmed than enticed by the suggestion, and the widow did not insist. The grey shape was left to find its way to Léon Toppe who, still entranced by the beautiful divorcée, now became redder-faced still.

Mme. Légère, with feminine flair or perhaps simply with her vivacious intelligence and perception, which were almost on a par with those of her hostess, watched Mlle. Plaine handing, one after another, several pages to M. Toppe for signature, and immediately understood that between them there was something more, or less, than paper. If the graceful divorcée subsequently abandoned her second prospect in a single afternoon, it was not of course because she was intimidated by the apparent competition, but because she felt that such competition was beneath her. She dropped Léon like a boring toy.

Mme. Marius was gently complaining about the number of days the ABC people said they would need to spend in her cellar – French artisans typically work several jobs at the same time – and Léon Toppe was drawing himself up very straight and

muttering that "to do our job well we must dig and analyze deep," when the French doors banged open to admit two adolescents: a boy and a girl twelve or thirteen years old and apparently twins, in spite of a great difference of weight. These also were visiting relations, but they had not won over their hostess as their distant cousin Alexandra had. The children did not think of closing the doors, but the June day was radiant with light, heat and flowers, and no one else thought of closing them either.

Closing the children out would have been another matter. Their hostess began to introduce them but they ran on out of the room. She called them back but they paid no attention. For the first time since the beginning of this story, something like anger flickered on our heroine's face.

A magnificent long-haired German shepherd could now be seen lying outside on the garden grass, watching the open French doors with grave, attentive eyes. This was Ernest Ohrdre's dog. Mme. Marius's alert, muscular grey-and-tobacco-colored Airedale Newton had been dancing playfully around the bigger dog for some time, but to no avail: after a short sniff, the exceptionally beautiful German shepherd had gone back to his solemn waiting. Not even the sudden arrival and departure of two cats could distract the attention of the big dog. The Airedale disappeared in hot pursuit.

The ABC men drained their glasses and took their leave of the ladies. On the way out through the garden Ferrari stepped on the German shepherd. Ernie felt sure Ferrari had done it on purpose.

*

The village of Fleuré is an old basket-making village. Some time ago many of its inhabitants earned their living by harvesting and drying local willow shoots and reeds that were subsequently soaked, kept in a damp cellar with an earth floor, and woven into baskets, chair-seats and other objects. The weaver sat all day in this damp room, bent low over his or her work, paid, of course, by the piece. It was a sad business, in every sense of the word, but it kept a number of generations going before plastic bags took over the world. Even now a few old ones can be found, forlornly seeking clients who want rush-bottomed chairs repaired. No one ever seems to.

In one of these dark damp rooms, somewhere in Fleuré, in front and by the light of a number of flickering candles, an unknown person in the shadows positioned five small objects that appeared to have vaguely human shapes.

Chapter 2: The Bumpkins and the Nouveaux-Riches

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a *village pittoresque* must be in want of a lot of rich Parisians to colonize it. Such truth was never easier to understand than on this early summer day. Picardy may be better known for rain than it is for sun, but Picardy in the sun, with its Gothic and Romanesque churches, its *châteaux*, its game-filled forests and its Roman ruins, its low rolling hills and fields and ancient houses with their brilliant gardens – Picardy in the sun reminds one of the German expression, happy as *Gott in Frankreich,* and the Yiddish *vi got in frankraykh.*

It is not therefore surprising that colonial Parisians, known locally as *les étrangers,* settled here years ago, as had the Romans and the Gauls before them – all seeking to be as happy as God in France. The population of Fleuré had long consisted of two not quite feuding, but skirmishing, populations. No one ever doubted which camp he belonged to, and the widow Marius's long stone house was one of the few where one could encounter the natives and the invaders under the same roof.

The rich *bourgeois parisiens* had come in numbers, and they had bought houses. As they bought, property values increased, which pleased those who still had something to sell but drove away the young villagers who had been hoping to acquire something for themselves. The *Parigots* returned to the city for the work-week, or for the winter, and this gradually led to the closing of *boulangeries, boucheries, épiceries* and schools. The Parisian Mme. Vane had even gathered the empty beer-bottles the workers had left on her newly-purchased grounds and returned them to M. Oiseau, the village grocer, for the deposit. She had bought nothing herself, and sealed her local fate forever.

At the same time "the foreigners" had discovered not only that their neighbors often did not like them very much, but also that the *villageois* were not the romantic, happy, good-hearted rustic types they had seen in so many beautiful movies. The Parisians heard stories of drunkenness, theft, laziness and brutality, some true, some not. And they tended to see Sunday Mass as at best a peasant superstition, although on this count the two camps were much less systematically divided.

In the end each group had learned it was different, and stayed in its sector. Though sometimes scattered in bits throughout the village, the two enclaves were easy enough to distinguish: the Parisians' houses were impeccably painted, with expensive new cars parked in front of them.

Today, however, was the day of the parish festival, which was an event few from Fleuré – few at least of the natives – would miss. Mme. Marius and her often-remarked and lovely new visitor from the United States had taken a table in the temporary shade by ten in the morning, even before the official opening of the

festivities. She was always fond of a good seat and a good table, and the sunny day was already threatening such heat that constant shade would be needed. The eventual western sun would not cast the shadow of the huge stone structure at their backs until the late hours of the afternoon.

The chateau was surrounded almost exclusively by yellow and pink rosebushes – what Mme. Marius called *la pauvreté du jardinage municipal.* The heat was already enough to drive most of the birds into shade, and the chatter of the dozen "organizers" who had already arrived to get things started was enough to drown out whatever song the hot birds could manage. Opposite the two ladies, a hundred meters off, was a great crenellated wall and a round tower. Mme. Marius, relaxed and smiling, was as usual explaining things.

"The chateau, you know, was long ago taken over by the *municipalité* and filled with linoleum and electric wires. Believe me, my dear, you don't want to go in there. Everything left worth seeing can be seen from outside. But the ancient monastery in front of you" – she gestured at the crenellated wall – "still belongs to the Church. The monks there are the happiest people I know – they remind me of my father, though my father was not a monk."

She laughed. "Their gardens are a paradise of flowery color and, like you and unlike the chateau, the inside of the monastery is as loveable as its outside." She had taken a liking to her unexpected niece. Alexandra smiled, and blushed only a little.

Then the young American's loquacious hostess grew silent. Sensing that her aunt had gone somewhere else – she not infrequently had these dreamy spells – Alexandra waited quietly for her to return.

Elisabeth Marius was in fact remembering things past: she thought of her father's laughter and love of good wine, then of her mother's sometimes brutal intelligence and independence, then of a husband who had died too young and of the children they had not had. A good deal of the old lady's affection for her niece was probably inspired by absences: she had always felt that the predominant fact of life was solitude, and feared it.

The stream of associations flowed back into the parish festival, and the mute spell passed.

The two had difficulty moving their big wooden table out of the already encroaching sun. "You'll of course still be here at the end of summer – the monks plant late. Just wait until you see their dahlias." She smiled, recollecting and anticipating them.

"They're the most beautiful I've ever seen: big spiky yellows and deep reds and purples and almost blacks, and they always send me hundreds." Alexandra bought their first bottle of good, hard French cider, and the two companions sat down to drink and gossip. Before them, to the side of the monastery, were sloping fields and some very large and ancient oaks and locust trees, their trunks twisted and grooved.

Mme. Légère joined the two ladies, grimaced at the cider she was given, and sat back to enjoy what she knew would be memorable commentary. *Parisienne* that she was, she knew her old friend well.

Although she had nothing better than pale cider to drink, Elisabeth Marius was in form. For Alexandra's edification and for her friend's amusement, she passed in review what seemed the entire panoply of Fleuré. The young lady listened with that studious gravity that Americans often bring to Europe.

"There's *M. le Curé;* I'll introduce you later. He's a kind man, but his sermons sound like a catalogue of social problems. His Masses are masterpieces of boredom." Mme. Marius laughed again.

"I miss his replacement from last summer – a distant cousin of mine, Father Alexandre." Mme. Légère reflected that a large part of the regional population appeared to have some sort of blood link to her friend. The link with the cousin in question went back to the eighteenth century.

"No one will ever forget Father Alexandre. In two months, half the parishioners stopped coming, and the other half had their lives changed forever."

M. le Curé, preoccupied with the last details of his own parish festival, passed at some distance but acknowledged the ladies with a bemused, vapid but very sweet smile. On the other side of the field of tables and chairs, local musicians were setting up: accordion, violin, bagpipes.

"Over there by the barbecue, getting the *merguez* ready, is our butcher, M. Jousse. Extraordinary man. You see his hunting dog there, by his side, with its leg bandaged. M. Jousse did the sewing and bandaging himself, after the wild boar attacked. You'll find this difficult to believe, Alexandra, but one of the sports they practice around here – I'm not sure 'sport' is the word – consists of killing a wild boar with nothing but a knife in your hand. I don't think you do such things even in Upstate New York."

Alexandra looked appropriately impressed, and perhaps more admiring than a correctly modern young lady should.

"That day," her hostess continued, "his dog saved his life by turning away the boar. I've heard the story several times already. Some of the old hunters around here are more attached to their dogs than to their wives."

"Some of them," said Belle Légère, who knew little about dogs but something about wives, "are right."

"Unfortunately," added Mme. Marius, smiling, "good M. Jousse has a reputation for a certain cavalier attitude toward the food laws of France – not just the selling of undeclared wild game, which of course is his illegal, God-given right and almost his duty, but also a less admirable habit of changing the 'good until ...' dates on his commercial meat. Nevertheless, I don't personally know anyone who's died, or even been ill."

"Well," said her friend, "at least not very."

"There's M. Brioche – you know him, Alexandra. He's been our baker for two or three years now. Funny how they change so often: they come to the village, work like beasts of burden, complain of their fate, make a fortune and disappear. He starts at two in the morning, then snatches sleep while his wife is at the cash register. I don't know how they managed four children."

This last comment caused Belle Légère to guffaw. "I hope he's better at making children than he is at making bread," she said. "He uses industrial, frozen dough, brought in from Paris. You can tell by all the little crumbs."

"You can tell, alas, by the taste and the texture."

The earnest American took in every word of the exchange between the two women; she was concentrated on each French fact they produced, although they were speaking in English, for her.

"You both know a lot of village gossip," she said.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet, young lady." The divorcée's English was almost as good as that of her widowed friend: it kept a faint trace of French accent, but her vernacular was flawless. "And don't knock gossip. You read the same thing in Balzac, Flaubert and Zola and you call it great art. Good gossip is the art of knowing the people you live among."

A dumpy, over-dressed, middle-aged lady came up, introduced herself to Alexandra before the others had a chance to speak, kissed everyone and sat down uninvited. She smelled of garlic. For this or for some other reason, Belle Légère moved her chair slightly away.

Mme. Vane was the notorious *Parisienne* who had returned the bottles for the deposit. Nonetheless, from the moment of her arrival in Fleuré, she had taken the local clubs and associations in hand. She intimidated the villagers, who did not like her any more than anyone else seemed to, but they admired her energy and her gift for getting things done. Fleuré had never before had such an active club life.

"I have so much to do, darlings, I can't stay more than a minute, but I wanted at least to say hello to your lovely American niece. Everyone's telling the most wonderful stories about her."

Alexandra looked alarmed, or embarrassed, perhaps because Mme. Vane was speaking in French and she wasn't entirely sure of what she had said.

"Ah, here is my beloved other half. Perhaps he will take my place. Raymond, this is Elisabeth's American niece Alexandra."

Raymond Vane sat down stiffly on his wife's former chair and proceeded to make a series of comments of a disobliging sort for a United States citizen – in spite or because of the presence of the young American; it was hard to say. He spoke constantly, and seemed to feel that the expression of his thoughts was a condescension to the others, for which they should be grateful. For some time no one else made any attempt to speak, though not perhaps for the reason M. Vane imagined.

No one was surprised that a pseudo-intellectual should hold such opinions – Raymond Vane no doubt considered himself an intellectual, and a conscientious member of the Thought Police – but everyone was struck by the discourtesy of his remarks.

"I read recently," he said with a little smirk, "that more than fifty per cent of all Americans are obese, and that almost fifty per cent of the men are homosexual. On the other hand, apparently only twenty-five per cent of them are poor."

After a time, Elisabeth Marius cut critically in. "I'm surprised," she said, "to hear of so many fat Americans. Not long ago they were fit enough to come over here and free us from the Nazi occupation. But it is indeed true that until the Marshall Plan, we French had small occasion to wax fat."

This exchange continued for a few more sentences, during which Raymond Vane found himself at the short end of the wit stick. It was an end he did not relish, and he soon found an excuse to be on his way.

"Quels cons," said Mme. Légère. It was the first time she had spoken. In oral French it was impossible to know whether she was speaking in the singular or the plural, but her friend Elisabeth knew.

The three were happy to be alone again. The musicians began to play their Picardy songs. For a while the women did not speak, perhaps preferring the music and the view of the old trees and the monastery. Perhaps Elisabeth Marius was thinking of people who were not there.

*

The day advanced and Mme. Marius gave up trying to stay out of the uncomfortable sun. For this reason, or because she had earlier been subjected to Raymond Vane, or because there was almost nothing to drink, she slipped into one of her rare bad moods. She struggled with it. A bad mood, she thought, is irrational unhappiness: suddenly she did not like the cider.

"This tepid cider is all very well but it's a pity there's no champagne."

"Champagne is my daily beverage," said Belle Légère, reasonably. "But it's hardly what we can expect from our local peasants at their parish festival." She was happy to be speaking English again. It gave them a chance to say things they would not have risked in French.

Just then the folk music swelled into a particularly risqué song – something about paternity and bulls and cows – and the two Frenchwomen burst out laughing. Elisabeth Marius seized the occasion to put herself back into a good mood, like someone arranging a bouquet, putting a wayward flower into its right place.

Alexandra wanted to know what was funny. Her aunt declined to translate, "because you wonderful Americans are a little bit *prudes*."

She poured more cider all around and sat back. For some reason, she began to think about the animosity between Ernest Ohrdre and Ferrari, and that between Mme. Légère and Mme. Vane. She wondered, in each case, what could be the deep explanation. Then she dropped the subject and stared at the blue sky. Thoughts of her parents, long dead, came back to her. High and pale in the west moved a few strings of cirrus cloud.

*

"Oh look, there's poor Mme. Vique." Another sad, slow figure, reminiscent of Mlle. Plaine but more curvaceous and fleshy, passed before them. This time it was Mme. Légère who showed her knowledge of local lore: for a Parisian, she was unusually

well-informed. "She's another of Léon's friends. She doesn't look like much but they say she does whatever he wants." Alexandra was a little embarrassed to hear such comments, and the amused tone that accompanied them.

"They don't live together, though – maybe because she's not his only friend. They say he has several, but none of them seems to amount to anything." The word "dog" crossed the beautiful lady's cruel mind. It was her turn to feel embarrassed, at the thought of the even fleeting attention she had once paid the man.

Mme. Marius laughed and agreed with her. "Léon Toppe is perhaps more interested in quantity than in quality – at least, if one can judge by the ongoing mess in my cellar."

The old lady's Parisian friend had the reputation that usually accompanies a rich romantic life. Sometimes she seemed proud of her *aventures,* and sometimes she went to lengths to be discreet. At the moment, she was reveling in her expertise.

The widow was a ready listener, and did not ask questions. Her own reputation was simpler: there had been a rumor concerning a gentleman some time after the death of her husband; the gentleman had faded away; the husband was remembered more nostalgically than accurately; and that was all most people knew, or thought they knew. Elisabeth Marius remained dedicated to her late husband's family.

An enormous, aging, muscular man walked by. "There's Popeye!" Mme. Légère had found more fuel for the gossip machine. "He owns the local café. You see that scrawny, battered thing trailing behind him? We call her Olive Oil. He beats her. Ties her up in a chair, they say. Burns her with his cigarettes. They're in love."

It was difficult to tell whether *la belle Américaine* was more shocked or fascinated. She was in any case quickly acquiring new knowledge of *la France et les Français.*

The brilliant divorcée looked at her empty cup, sighed at the brown peasant champagne, and filled it. "You mustn't, you know, ever go into his café – or any village café."

Alexandra looked at her in surprise. "I thought all French people went to cafés."

"That, my dear, is what you Americans think. The French think something else." She lit a consolatory cigarette, to palliate the cider. "For a start, the right sort of people don't go to cafés at all. My father would have locked me in my bedroom for the rest of my adolescence if he had ever caught me in a café."

Alexandra smiled. "Might he have caught you?"

"Of course. But I grew up in Paris, where you find the only respectable cafés in France. Parisians who have *rendez-vous* outside their homes or offices – for concerts, the cinema, whatever – those people have little choice. They can stand outside in the rain while the bus is twenty minutes late, or they can meet in a café."

Young Alexandra was filled anew with solemn fascination for her strange new world. She would have been capable of taking notes, but didn't need to.

Her guide continued. "Then you have cafés outside Paris but in big towns. Most of them are off limits for respectable people, but one or two are places you might be able to take your grandmother."

"That," said Mme. Marius, alarmed at the thought, "would depend on the grandmother."

"Indeed," said the *Parisienne.* "But we both know that a village café is nothing more than a booze outlet for the local yahoos and miscellaneous riff-raff. The underage girls hang around outside because they're too young to go in without their parents." She smiled. "Of course, they manage to get together later with their drunks."

"Funny," said Alexandra. "I've always dreamed of croissants and espresso in a simple French village café. *Grand-mère, grand-père, l'oncle Gaston* and an accordion."

Belle put her hand briefly on the girl's. "You are so delightfully American! In the city, well, yes for the espresso and the croissants, though I think you're going to have to give up all hope of *tonton Gaston.* But even in Paris a lady would forego the espresso and take the croissants at home. And you'd never manage even to *find* a cup of coffee or a croissant in Popeye's café, or in any village café."

Popeye and Olive Oil walked by, holding hands. Mme. Légère lit another cigarette, studied them, and turned to her New World friend.

"Isn't love sweet?"

*

Belle abandoned sado-masochistic romance at the sight of a very old man. "Over there is M. Allonne. He's one of the only rich people in Fleuré who wasn't imported from Paris. That's his mansion way up at the top of the valley. Sad story. He's not Jewish but his young wife was. She was taken away during the Nazi occupation here, and some German officer or other blackmailed him for the rest of the war. He paid a large part of his fortune to keep her alive, as he thought, but of course he

never saw her again. I'm surprised that he's come. He rarely leaves his empty house." The *Parisienne* spoke this sentence with a keen sense of a fine, wasted *domaine.*

There being little possible rejoinder to such a story, no one spoke for some time.

"Perhaps," said Mme. Marius at last – showing thus she had been thinking about the old man during her silent spell – "perhaps that's why he came."

*

"There's Mlle. Plaine," said Alexandra.

"Yes," said her aunt. "She works on and off for several of the people here – not just Léon. Sometimes you'll see her at M. Jousse's *boucherie,* sometimes at M. Brioche's *boulangerie,* sometimes serving in Popeye's café. All of it undeclared, of course – what we call *le marché noir,* though it sounds much worse in English. Let's say *le marché gris* – that suits the poor woman in question."

The sun was at its zenith, the Picardy folk songs rolled over the chatter of hundreds of people, and the widow returned to silence and musing yet again. Perhaps she was still thinking about old M. Allonne, perhaps she was thinking about the younger Mlle. Plaine, perhaps she was thinking of something else.

"Fate and nature," she said slowly, "are full of unspeakable injustice."

*

"Oh Lord! There are the children! Pray they go away!" Mme. Marius had come out of her *rêverie.*

"They're playing with Ernest Ohrdre and that beautiful dog of his. Perhaps they won't notice us."

"*Au contraire,* I hope they will. That way we can be sure they'll stay away. They have no interest in me at all – nor in staying here in France, now they've discovered I have no television."

The twins, racing back and forth with a dog far more attractive than they, made a strange contrast with each other. The boy was so fat that his lumbering after the agile German shepherd involved almost as much horizontal sway as it did forward movement. The girl was thin and white and alarming: she was complaisant, but seemed interested in nothing except washing her hands and helping with household chores, if asked.

"I've tried almost everything with them, you know. I've taken them to restaurants that serve French fries, to children's museums, to the forest and to visit our neighbors' children. Nothing works. I even almost took them to the Parc Euro Disney, but I couldn't quite bring myself to that."

Ernie and the boy began shooting at each other with toy rifles; had they been real, the boy would have been an unsportingly easy target. The girl stood demurely to the side, watching. At one point Ernie pretended to be hit and let himself fall nearly to the ground.

"You could bury me, maybe," he said, in the English he could command, "except I don't want sat my clothes are dirty."

Just then Ferrari approached, saw Ernie and turned away.

"How on earth," asked Mme. Légère, "did those children get names like Héloïse and Abélard?"

"A scandal!" The old lady pursed her lips. "My nephew's singularly ignorant wife took it into her very small head that the names would be romantic, or original, or poetic – God knows what she expected. That they would become lovers? That her son would be castrated by the neighbors?" Her eyes flashed and she looked away in silence.

"I don't suppose it's their fault, really." She seemed to be speaking about more than their names.

"Héloïse is almost sweet in her strange way, and her brother is just *naïf*. Neither of them has what you Americans, Alexandra, call 'a clue.' Perhaps you can help me with them during their stay here. Really, when I accepted the proposal to have them visit, I had no idea."

Alexandra was nonplussed to be called upon to do something she had never done, for children she did not like, but she was ready to try. She watched fat Abélard rolling on the grass with the dog. Ernie and Héloïse stood awkwardly aside, equally averse to getting dirty.

*

For a while everyone watched the hay-bale-throwing contest. After each round, the bar was raised. Men struggled to push the heavy bale over the bar, hoping not to knock it down. It was like pole-vaulting, with a pitchfork instead of a pole, and a bale of hay instead of a person. Popeye held the pitchfork in his hands like a toy and literally pitched the bale high above, and over, the undisturbed metal bar.

There was a rolling-barrel game, with two ropes: one went through the barrel, the other stretched just above it. The trick was to haul yourself, seated on the barrel, by pulling on the upper rope, from one end to the other, without suddenly spilling onto the ground. It looked easy, but neither man nor child had yet succeeded. Few women tried.

Ferrari tried. The barrel tilted left, then tilted right, then dumped him before he had advanced three feet. He laughed, but looked embarrassed.

There was the inevitable *chamboule-tout:* a pyramid of empty tin cans to be knocked off a shelf with a ball, in three tries. The women played this game with the men, who generally were more successful and obviously enjoyed their superiority. Drawing on her own stock of wiles, Belle suspected some of the women of missing on purpose.

*

During the rest of the slow, hot, beautiful, noisy afternoon, her two companions continued to extend Alexandra's knowledge of France and Fleuré.

Alexandra learned of Mlle. Anna Cronique who, at the age of 101, was the oldest village resident and its only known royalist. Mlle. Cronique had memories from before the Great War – from a time when the world, she said, was an almost utterly different place, although alas she could not personally recall a reigning French king, or even a French emperor.

In spite of her age, Mlle. Cronique still kept the village antiques shop, but she opened it only on the ever rarer occasions when she wished to, shuffling to the paint-peeling wooden door with her canes, gripped in shaking gnarled hands. For her, the parish festival was one of the important events of the year.

Alexandra watched her concentrating now on an overloud conversation with the old mayor of Fleuré, a communist. They had been in the Résistance together. Mlle. Cronique's fiancé had disappeared on a German train, and the mayor's brother had been taken into the forest and shot by the Nazis the day before the Americans liberated the village. Some years later, that brother's only child was killed playing with a live artillery shell he had found, as children in Fleuré still sometimes did. The twice-bereaved widow never recovered her mental equilibrium.

It occurred to Alexandra that the old royalist and the old communist had more in common than most people do.

*

The day wore and the evening shadows came at last. Valentin, the handsome *idiot du village,* was drunk and dancing obscenely. Distressed by the drunken display, M. and Mme. Goudi were trying to get him home. The *Parisienne* just laughed. Alexandra's aunt explained.

"Valentin has something of a village schedule – in fact he recognizes three social classes: people whose gardens he tends and with whom he dines once a week; people whom he will talk with but won't work for and doesn't see socially; and people he won't speak to.

"When Valentin works in your garden and lunches or dines with you, he's at your table. No one ever gives him money – he's always paid in kind – and no one drinks wine during that meal, for the same obvious reason. Today, perhaps one of the Parisians gave him money."

"The Parisians," said the *Parisienne,* "think the villagers exploit him, letting him work in their gardens without pay."

The old lady hardly deigned reply. "Horsefeathers! Valentin's home is here. The village women wash his hair every week. If he ever moved to the city, or to a special home, he'd become a thing, and die."

*

Old M. and Mme. Eclaire joined the ladies at their tired table as they were preparing to leave – the Eclaires had just returned from Paris and had rushed to catch the final minutes of the festival. M. Eclaire had long ago made a fortune in non-industrial pastries in the capital, retired and bought the house next to the widow's. Mme. Eclaire seemed not to mind in the least that her husband ostentatiously doted on his beautiful old neighbor, although the beautiful old neighbor sometimes did mind. As always, M. Eclaire presented – although, by courteous discretion, he made the gift to the trio – a large box of exquisite pastries, which in fact softened all hearts a little, as very fine pastries will. Old M. Eclaire presented the little cakes with exaggerated gallantry. Old Mme. Eclaire giggled.

*

"Who is that," said Alexandra, "standing alone way over there, among the trees? Isn't it M. Cointreau?"

It was well after nine o'clock but the sun, delightfully cooler now, had not yet set. Elisabeth Marius let her gaze follow the long shadows down to the ancient oaks across the meadow. The solitary well-dressed outline did seem to be that of Camille Pierre Richard Cointreau.

Chapter 3: Ernest Goes in Earnest

It was surprising, almost unnatural, that a man as immaculately clean as Ernest Ohrdre would have a large, hairy dog, but Ernie loved the animal as he had perhaps never loved a person since the death of his mother. Although out of standard because of its long hair, this German shepherd, whose name was Max, could have run with those owned by Juan Carlos of Spain: powerfully graceful, deep-chested, straight-backed and – it was a rarity – perfectly parallel hind legs in motion. Max was Ernie's Ferrari.

The dog had learned to live with a finicky master. He never tried to sleep on the bed, and like most dogs of his race he rarely drooled. He had learned to do his doggy duty discreetly and only at authorized times. He had even learned to be quiet. If Ernie had been blind, Max would have been his perfect, attentive seeing eye.

Ernie went through his entire apartment with the vacuum cleaner twice a day. He moved all the furniture and vacuumed even Max. To the people of the village who made the acquaintance of the newcomer, it all seemed silly and even grotesque. But in their way the people of Fleuré are tolerant, and there was something touching about this courteous man and his dog: they were devoted to each other, and they were happy together. "What more," many a denizen of Fleuré might have said, "could anyone ask?"

One of Max's authorized times was late in the evening. Although the final Picardy early summer light had faded less than an hour earlier, it was almost midnight when Ernie, with his dog on the leash all French dogs are required to have, began walking down the main street of little Fleuré. The rare streetlights had already been turned off – this was still a rural village – but the moon was up and full and there was no need of a flashlight.

Ernie crossed the train tracks and Max walked calmly at his side, listening to the monologue pet-owners often subject their animals to. The dog appeared to take canine pleasure in hearing that next month they were going to visit a friend in Paris. They walked past the river and the old mill house and turned up the street, following the slow valley slope toward the old *école des filles,* now a private residence.

As far as anyone knows, both were killed instantly. The car had swerved strangely, drunkenly, hit them full on and stopped for some time a little further down the street. Even in the moonlight it could be seen that the car was red. The driver seemed to hesitate, and perhaps then suddenly to panic: the tires screeched and the vehicle disappeared into the night.

*

Camille Cointreau put on an old Nina Simone record and lit a long, gold-filtered Russian cigarette. He missed Paris. Tears came to his eyes at the words "my baby don't care for me."

*

Jean Allonne stood at the great French windows of his mansion, too recently built to be called a *château,* and looked down into the sparkling little valley of Fleuré lights, a kind of miniature San Francisco Bay. A moth beat noiselessly at the pane. When it rested, it looked like a chip of bark. Jean Allonne lived in his customary isolation; he looked remote and utterly sad, and of course, since there was no one present to speak to, he spoke no word. Since before the war he had been a continuous resident of the village, but now he seemed to have almost no relation to it.

*

Elisabeth Marius lay luxuriously awake in her bed with a book. She was trying to understand why a Doppler effect existed for sound but not for light. The question was like those her mother had known the answers to, and her father had helped her with. On her bedside table was a glass of wild strawberry liqueur, which filled the corner of the room with its perfume.

She studied Einstein's formulae again, half convinced he was wrong, half exasperated not, perhaps, fully to understand. All her life she had loved to understand.

*

The moon was a disk of useless light. In spite of her electric green polyester pyjamas, the widow Radis was sleeping the sleep of the hard-working just.

*

Valentin was sobbing, and trying to explain, but even in the best and calmest of times it was difficult to understand what he said: he spoke a kind of retarded regional dialect and had difficulty with articulation. And these were not the calmest of times. His repeated exclamations of "Wecca! Wecca!" were, after a long effort of interpretation by M. and Mme. Goudi, provisionally taken to mean "red car."

The *gendarmes* understood almost nothing and hesitated to take down his words, since they couldn't imagine how they would ever be understood, much less used in a

court of law. They did, however, intend to look for a red car damaged in a hit-and-run accident.

"Eddug! Eddug!" gave still more difficulty, but Valentin was apparently the only witness. M. and Mme. Goudi often looked after him and gave him shelter, on the cold nights when he wanted shelter. They convinced the *gendarmes* not to take Valentin in – the *gendarmes* didn't need much convincing – and said they would take him home with them, question him again in the morning and then accompany him to the *gendarmerie.* They did not add, as they might have, that they would also pray with him.

After many police notations, measurements and photographs, the two cadavers were taken away. Mme. Goudi put her arm around Valentin and, accompanied by her husband, walked slowly back to her house with him. From the woods at the top of the valley, owls hooted. At the sound of approaching humans, a raggedy cat, with a shrew in its mouth, disappeared over a fence. It was obvious that this handsome and fragile man was keenly moved by the death of the dog.

*

Very late that same night, some hours after Ernest's death, Mme. Vane could be seen by moonlight in her open garden. The white roses glowed like death's heads. The woman was burning something. She heard footsteps, and vanished.

Belle Légère stopped at the smoldering papers, hesitated, took something from the pile and went on her way.

*

It need not be said that a fatal hit-and-run accident in a village like Fleuré can fuel local gossip for months. The conversation of Elisabeth and Alexandra Marius and Belle Légère hardly required more fuel, but it was nonetheless consuming a great deal of it.

The widow finished rinsing the silver teapot in hot water and brewed late breakfast tea. "My favorite nephew Luc called this morning." She turned toward the American. "Now, of course, I have a favorite niece as well.

"Luc is a lieutenant in the *gendarmerie.* Apparently the *gendarmes* have indices of the tires of the car that left the scene – not the brand or the profile, at least not yet, but the width. And they're checking every red car of that description in the area. They've already found several here in Fleuré."

She poured from her exquisite eighteenth-century teapot into her exquisite twentieth-century porcelain cups, none cracked and only one chipped, which she reserved for herself. The teapot, on the other hand, was decidedly battered, but brilliantly, deeply polished. "One of those whose car matches the description is that of the man they call Ferrari."

Both of the other women looked up sharply at this news. Alexandra was especially intrigued. "Ferrari? The man who was here? Who seemed to dislike M. Ohrdre so intensely?"

"The same," said her aunt. "But though the tires on his car are the right width, there are no bald patches on them – and the hit-and-run car left screech patches in the street. Nor were there any signs of a recent collision."

Mme. Légère put down her cup. "On that old wreck of a BMW? How could anyone tell? Besides, I once heard of a hit-and-run driver who immediately washed his car, rubbed it all down so as to remove bits of paint and such, and then drove it through mud. He'd never have been caught if his mother-in-law hadn't denounced him."

She picked up her cup and reflected. "I vote for Ferrari. He certainly had the motive of enmity, though I have no idea why. Perhaps he changed his tires."

"You think then," said Mme. Marius, "that M. Ohrdre was murdered?"

On this, the beautiful Parisian hesitated. "I think," she said at last, "that I don't know. It's easy to suspect people of all sorts of dreadful things because people are capable of all sorts of dreadful and suspicious things. I have only to look into my own heart to know that."

Her old friend, sensing that she had not finished speaking, passed her a slice of brioche in silence.

"I can tell you of another suspicious thing. In the middle of the night, some hours after the accident, I saw that dreadful Vane woman burning papers – in the middle of the night! And when she heard footsteps, she disappeared." Mme. Légère omitted to mention that she had taken something from the ashes.

Mme. Marius looked at her, surprised. "My dear! Whatever were you doing in the street, in the middle of the night?"

The beautiful Parisian mumbled something about not being able to sleep, scratched her nose and looked away.

*

After her friend had left, the aunt turned to the niece and asked her what she thought of Mme. Légère's story.

"It surprised me as much as it seemed to surprise you," said the American. "I don't know. For reasons I can't fathom – or which are simply hidden – our charming *Parisienne* loathes Mme. Vane – who isn't, of course, charming or even likable. But do you know any reason for such antipathy?"

Her aunt looked out the window into the bright summer garden. The peonies had wilted and needed cutting. Early white and deep pink hollyhocks – it was an old-fashioned garden – struck stiffly up at angles in odd corners. Gillyflowers and fern, ancient and delicate, were growing out of the stone wall. "None," she said, "at all."

Alexandra hesitated. The eastern sun caught the gold in her hair. "Do you believe that story about the burning papers?"

Her aunt was thinking of the season's successful, pure white peonies. "I don't know what to think."

Alexandra hesitated again. "And do you have any reason to believe that Ernest Ohrdre's death was not an accident?"

The old lady answered in the negative. The reader of a mystery story may, however, be inclined to disagree.

*

The old widower Jean Allonne leafed through a tattered photograph album. Next to him was a bowl filled with drying hawthorn petals. Frail, wild hawthorn blossoms had been his wife's favorite flower. M. Allonne gathered the blossoms every year from the same bush, which was more than four hundred years old. Perpetual sadness was still in his eyes, but he was smiling. Not many people in the village could remember him smiling.

*

M. Jousse lay in his bed with his dog, which managed to sleep in spite of its master's snoring. People who knew M. Jousse said that his bed was so dirty that not even his dog would sleep in it, much less his wife, but this scene proves them at least half wrong. In a corner of the room was a heavy object wrapped in cloth. Blood was seeping from it.

*

Camille Pierre Richard Cointreau stopped in front of a mirror, caught by an image of himself. Perhaps because of the sadness in the eyes, he thought of Rembrandt's self-portraits, and Chardin's.

*

Léon Toppe farted in bed and turned on the television set. He felt warm and self-satisfied. He put his arm around her, and pulled her to him.

*

Alexandra put down her book of French grammar and took up one of French history. She felt perfect comfort in the fresh, stiff cotton sheets Mme. Radis had just put on her antique wooden bed. The window was ajar, and let in a gust of vaguely stormy air. Alexandra felt she had never been so happy in all her life.

*

Mme. Eclaire picked up the shirt her husband had let fall to the bedroom floor. She looked at it with tenderness. She held it to her face.

*

Mlle. Plaine washed one dirty dish, one knife, one fork and one glass. She turned on the television set and almost immediately fell asleep, breathing in starts, her mouth open. The bluish television glare made her face even less attractive than it was in daylight.

*

Mme. Vane could not sleep. Her blithe husband turned thoughtlessly from her, pulling the sheets away. Recalcitrant figures danced like evil fairies in her head.

*

Mme. Radis was having one of her recurrent nightmares. Elisabeth Marius had entered her kitchen again.

*

Héloïse, sobbing, was also having a nightmare. Like those of Lady Macbeth, her hands would not come clean.

*

Abélard was apparently having no nightmare and no dream. He was sleeping, as one says, like a log.

*

Mlle. Cronique awakened again, as she did many times in the night. Sometimes it was the pain in her legs that awakened her, sometimes it was memories of her fiancé. In some of her dreams, the Nazi train that had taken him away reversed direction, and brought him back.

*

Le vicomte d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune spoke no word but smiled, and put out his hand.

*

Elisabeth Marius was often too much in love with night to sleep – the wind was rising; there was storm far off in the air. She sat at her bedroom window and thought of her childhood. Her mother had loved her, Elisabeth's, father, but had married another man. She knew of course that there were different ways of interpreting such facts; she preferred to think that she had been loved by three parents. She remembered summer vacations with her father in Virginia. Lost in a dream of the coming storm, she resolved to drink a little less.

All her life she had sought serenity, in mathematics, in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach; sometimes she found it and sometimes she did not. She found it now. She smiled.

*

Mme. Vique shifted uncomfortably. She moved closer, but she was not interested in this. She tried to fall asleep.

*

Popeye lay at Olive Oil's side and watched her sleep. From time to time he stroked her hair.

*

The summer night was warm and the moon was nearly full. As he usually did on such summer occasions, Valentin spent half the night wandering the woody outskirts of Fleuré. He answered the hooting of owls and the barking of foxes and roe-deer.

The other half of the night he slept in one of the caves in the side of the valley, as had everyone else in Fleuré, during the war.

*

M. Brioche awakened at exactly two o'clock in the morning.

*

M. and Mme. Goudi lay close together, their heads filled with sugar-plums of superstition and coincidence, the stuff of the morrow's events.

*

Belle Légère smiled. The strap of her gown fell from her shoulder. She took his hand. A scrap of poetry went through her mind: *Dear heart, how like you this?*

Chapter 4: Funereal Suburbia

François Ahsse, *capitaine de la Gendarmerie française,* was even more exasperated than usual at the thought of Lieutenant Luc Marius. The Sunday morning was eggshell blue, touched with a few cumulus puffs. The Captain put down the telephone and gave up. "He's probably," he said to himself with contempt, "at Mass." Luc's boss disliked goody-goodies and hypocrites.

He reached Lieutenant Marius a few hours later. "How many Masses do you go to in one day?"

It was the Lieutenant's singular misfortune to suffer from a strange sort of laughter whenever he was uncomfortable or excited. He laughed now and, as was often the case, it was impossible to tell whether the laugh was a tic, or normal.

Many a Frenchman would have taken offense at so impertinent a question, but the captain was Luc's immediate superior, and Luc was a good-natured and forgiving, if sometimes sardonic, man. "Only one, *mon capitaine,* though I probably ought to go to two. It gives one a little time to think. You really should try it sometime." Luc laughed strangely, again.

The captain brought his lieutenant up to date on the nasty and obscure hit-and-run accident in Fleuré, of which Luc was already aware. Ahsse knew it was shortly to be splashed about in the local newspapers, and told his subordinate to get to the site and carry out the inquiry quickly. Since the captain was never very sure of himself in verbal jousting with the lieutenant, he then hung up.

Luc Marius was familiarly called Lucky Luke, after the French cartoon cowboy. There was resemblance: the cartoon character and the flesh-and-blood lieutenant were both long and lanky, although Lieutenant Marius had begun to put on a bit of weight at the midriff. Tall as he was, it made him look like a slightly pregnant basketball player. Both the cartoon figure and the real one had also more or less given up smoking – the cowboy, in his more recent editions, had taken to holding a straw in his mouth. Luc Marius often carried an unlit cigar, perhaps in homage to an old American detective hero of his. On special occasions, he gave in and lit the cigar.

But the cowboy Lucky Luke was lucky. The lieutenant did not think of himself as especially so, and the scars on each side of his left shoulder, and another rather romantic one on his forehead, just above his right eye, suggested he was right.

The widow Marius's favorite grand-nephew was in his early thirties. After two degrees at *l'Ecole normale supérieure,* one of France's four or five greatest universities, he had surprised almost everyone who knew him by turning to a police career. Luc had previously spent years in studies that led to no particular *useful* degree. Now he was at last on the edge of promotion, but he was old for his rank.

His unforeseen choice of career did not in fact come from his unearned reputation for doing the opposite of what people expected of him. It came from his love of variety, of the general, of what some people still called a complete life. He had always suspected that both his aunt and he had inherited that love from some common ancestor. In spite of their extreme physical differences – like a terrier and a wolfhound – aunt and nephew had a great deal in common, and Luc was delighted to discover that his work was leading him to his favorite aunt's village.

Over the years they spent together more and more of whatever free time her grand-nephew could muster. Luc was always competent, always rational and sometimes intuitive. His aunt was usually all three. The difference showed in their ferocious chess games, of which they kept a tally: Luc was capable of out-thinking the old widow, but the overall score was in her favor, 127 games to 85.

They shared more than chess: they loved clothes, bull-fighting, good books and too much wine; they loved Latin and quantum physics; and in spite of, or because of, their sociable natures, they were both lonely. Luc's devotion to his aunt extended even to the consumption of her cooking. The fact that the nephew had recently acquiesced in his aunt's opinion that it was time for him to marry had brought them yet closer together. Now they were also looking for a wife.

*

The lieutenant let himself familiarly into the stone house and laughed. It was his rational laugh, not the compulsive one: he basked in his aunt's delight at seeing him.

Out of deference to her and to the presence of his mysterious American cousin, he mumbled something about staying in his own apartment, which was only an hour away. The house was large, however, and to Lucky Luke's relief he found himself in his usual handsome and comfortable bedroom – *la chambre bleue,* with its view of the village's Romanesque and Gothic church: the kind of confused, multi-century architecture found all over northern France. The wallpaper was pale blue, the *bateau-lit* and the *armoire* were of cherrywood; the walnut desk received northern light over Luc's left shoulder when he sat at it.

Mme. Marius was not only very pleased to have her favorite nephew staying with her for an unexpected time; she seemed most keen to have the American cousin and the French cousin get to know each other. She had quickly calculated that they were not too closely related to marry.

*

Mme. Radis, who hated polishing silver, was polishing silver. Her mistress, so it appeared to her, had an obsession with metals that tarnish: silver teapots, sterling side dishes, pewter platters, brass doorknobs, all sorts of silverware, and all needing her in order to shine.

Like the ladle she held in her hand, the ugly old maid reflected, but the human reflected meanly: her employer's guests, she thought, would do better to look at her table than to dine at it. Cheap pink liquid silver polish dribbled down onto Mme. Radis' tight orange skirt. Mme. Marius had told her many a time to use a good paste, instead. Her hands were black and that was not her fault, she thought, although her employer had often suggested she wear silver-polishing gloves.

Aunt, niece and nephew were seated in the long, glowing North Garden, where there was more shade. Since they were not at the moment speaking, the only sound was that of singing birds. A male blackbird chortled at the top of an old *faux-acacia.* Everywhere there were roses, of a dozen different hues. Some were yellow with pink edges; as they aged they turned pure white. The last of the wild strawberries ripened at the foot of the cherry tree. Cumulus clouds dotted a blue sky. The cirrus clouds were few, but the old lady thought she detected a distant brewing of rain.

The French lieutenant had quickly discovered that his cousin was not only very pretty, but amusing and clever as well. This pleased him especially, since he was perhaps even fonder of wit and intelligence than he was of beauty: they lasted longer.

The death of Ernest Ohrdre was of course still the prime subject of village conversation, and one hardly to be neglected in this garden, since one of its occupants had come officially to investigate it. Be it involuntary homicide, murder or simple hit-and-run, Ernie's was the only violent death Fleuré had witnessed in recent years. Had the villagers not been decent folk, they would have been grateful for the excitement.

Criminal pickins in Fleuré were scarce. Fifteen or twenty years earlier there had been a bank robbery in which someone had been killed. About ten years back a lonely local man had shot and killed his lonely wife, and then committed suicide in prison – but crime in the family never quite achieved the exotic thrill that crime with strangers gave: for the inhabitants of Fleuré, killing a spouse was too natural a gesture to justify more than a few weeks' talk; it was too close to the drunken disorderliness and the wife-beatings that seemed a part of daily life. From time to time a burglary or a car theft brought spice to village fare – such acts were less predictable, and so more dilatable, than beatings and drunkenness. But an outright killing was an uncommon feast.

"I know, Aunt, a good many of the people here in Fleuré, but nobody knows them as well as you do. Perhaps we could make a list of possible culprits and have your comments on each of them – assuming, of course, that the driver was a local man."

The small old lady searched her huge and ancient memory. "I suppose any such list would have to start with the man called Ferrari. I don't know his real name. He seems to have hated Ernest Ohrdre."

"Do you mean to say you don't think the death was an accident?"

"I don't know," she said. "One or two people have suggested it was not. In any case our M. Ferrari has a red car and people say he drives it wildly."

"But his car has already been examined and found not guilty. He has no alibi, but the tires show no sign of violence and the car seems not to have been damaged recently. Who else is on your list?"

Mme. Radis' voice came through the open window. "Don't think anybody really hated that nice man Ernest and his dog."

Instinctively, aunt, niece and nephew turned to listen. Even Alexandra, in her short time in Fleuré, had learned that however ridiculously Mme. Radis might dress, she did not think ridiculously – and anything Mme. Marius did not know about the village, Mme. Radis did. The fact that she had silently followed the entire garden conversation from within the house went a long way toward explaining how.

“And I don’t think Ferrari hates anybody. He just didn’t like Ernest. There’s lots of people I don’t like but I wouldn’t run over them with my car even if I had one. There’s plenty of local drunks around to do the job without malice aforethought.”

The French doors banged open. Mme. Radis left the adult discussion to shriek at Abélard and Héloïse: one of them had tracked chewing gum onto the Russian carpet.

Ten minutes later the ugly old servant brought a big crystal pitcher of fresh lemonade into the garden. Her hands were spotless but her frown had not changed.

“They don’t speak enough French to go to the shops,” said Mme. Marius. “I wonder where they got chewing gum.”

Alexandra smiled an innocent smile. “From me.”

“Alexandra!” cried her aunt. “You mustn’t give them such nasty things!” She sighed and watched the children wandering aimlessly at the other end of the garden.

“The poor dears. No coke, no TV and now no gum. It must be their idea of hell.”

*

The summer sun, obscured from time to time by a brief cloud, shone on the dark-grey hearse parked in front of the church, ready for the final voyage. There was something shocking about the alert, efficient, mechanical movements executed by the funeral home personnel as they snapped the hearse-carriage into place and slid the casket into the patient, somber car. The village priest had spoken solemnly and tenderly about the goodness of a man he had not known, badly-dressed children had stumbled through the reading of Biblical passages they did not understand, and the time of disposal had come.

“I don’t suppose,” said the widow to her Parisian friend, “that you came to pray for poor M. Ohrdre’s soul. So I suppose you came for the event.”

They were, with the rest of those who were not leaving immediately after the funeral Mass, waiting for the loading of the hearse and the slow progress to the nearby cemetery.

Mme. Légère smiled her pretty smile. “Wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“And I suppose you paid no attention to the homily, which indeed wasn’t worth attention. You appeared to spend all your time watching M. Ohrdre’s colleagues.”

The smile remained. "My guess, Elisabeth, is that you know me so well it's not worth the trouble to ask."

Her aged friend looked distracted by the numerous maneuvering automobiles, backings-up, door slammings, and tiny traffic jams. She was studying something.

Belle continued her monologue. "That beautiful ... boy, Camille, played the church organ with such delicacy that one would think he was sincerely moved. He never once looked up, and he was blinking hard during most of the ceremony."

"I have no doubt," said her friend at last, "that he was moved. He appears to be a man who feels a great deal. His weakness may be, unlike that of the bulk of humanity, not that he doesn't feel enough, but that he feels too much."

"Pity," said her companion, "that so much beauty should go to waste."

Mme. Marius laughed. "One woman's loss, Belle, is another man's gain. What did you think of the behavior of Ferrari and Léon Toppe? Did Ferrari look to you like a gloating victor?"

"Not in the least. But then each one was looking so respectably solemn that I wonder whether, unlike their colleague, they were showing whatever it is they're really feeling. You weren't in any case expecting Ferrari to burst out laughing during Mass?"

"*Au contraire.* I thought each looked sincerely grim."

Mme. Légère wondered if her friend was indulging in double entendre, or at least in artistic ambiguity. Her friend changed the subject.

"Have you noticed, Belle? Half the cars here are not from Fleuré – which I suppose isn't in itself unusual. But have you remarked upon the license plates?"

Belle admitted she hadn't.

"Ninety-three. They're all from a single suburban region of Paris. That must be where poor M. Ohrdre hailed from."

The younger woman looked around her and lowered her voice. "Now that you mention it, the strangers here look very much like suburban types."

Such a comment, coming from a French citizen, and especially from a Parisian, was not likely to be a compliment. It connoted ill-chosen polyester clothes, run-down

cities, boarded-up shops, tenement-houses, unemployment and school dropouts – everything, in fact, that Belle Légère did not connote.

The following day, Léon Toppe, Camille Cointreau and Ferrari were back at work in Mme. Marius's cellar.

*

A beautiful woman who looked vaguely like Belle Légère – it was hard to tell in the dark – stepped out one of the back doors of the *château de Fleuré.* A few clouds scudded across the sky, darkening the moon and the lady's face. She turned up her collar, looked around and disappeared down a forest path.

Fortunately for the person in question, Fleuré was in general a safe place. There were, however, exceptions.

*

In a damp and silent cellar, two hands reflected candle-light and arranged four small voodoo-like figures. So now, of course, the reader can have small doubt.

Chapter 5: The Only Good Ferrari Is a Red Ferrari

Almost all his life, Ferrari had been what Americans call a "loser." He had known a fleeting period of something approaching prosperity and marital bliss, or enough at least of the former to pay for some of the latter, as well as his first, and last, Ferrari. His passion for the car gave occasion to the racy knick-name that now degraded him like a verbal certificate of failure. Ferrari's wife had in the beginning found him charmingly helpless, shiftless and sad, and in the end found him helpless, shiftless and sad.

What Ferrari regretted losing in the subsequent divorce was, in order of increasing importance, his wife, his two young daughters, his house and his shiny yellow namesake. His wife lost little, and regretted nothing at all.

Reduced to the sorry life he was apparently now leading – but who can see into a human heart? – Ferrari had a single ritual of happiness, or at least of something as close to happiness as the man seemed likely ever again to get. As regular as Ernie, early every Sunday morning when the villagers were at Mass or still in bed, Ferrari took advantage of the absence of other cars to race his old BMW 325i among the twisting roads high above the valley and hills outside Fleuré. It was not easy, in this part of Picardy, to find roads that skirted steep drops and chasms, but it was possible,

and soon after his arrival in Fleuré Ferrari had found them. The old car still had power, and still inebriated its owner.

Before each Sunday morning rite, this lonely, middle-aged man went through sartorial preparations as elaborate as those of the finest of the church-going ladies in the village. He put on his trademark pink blazer with its large black-and-gold pseudo-aristocratic insignia on the breast pocket (he might just as well have been called Pink Blazer as Ferrari). It should perhaps be added that the pink in question was what the French call *vieux rose* – a deep purply pink, a very respectable pink as pinks go. It would nevertheless have been difficult not to sympathize even a little with Ferrari's ex-wife.

He put on his best shoes, which were cheap and black, with little imitation-gold buckles. He checked his gold ear-ring, his gold bracelet and his gold necklace, the latter hidden discreetly under his favorite pink shirt, which had begun to shrink a little. He slipped on his only tie – a red-and-yellow imitation school tie, although he had no idea what a school tie was. As always, the thought crossed his mind that one day his golden accoutrements would be of solid gold, and not the discount-store gold plate he had to settle for at the moment. Ferrari, like all of us, survived on hope.

He pushed his old car to the very limits of its power and speed. He loved slamming violently from one gear to the next. He felt the car fishtail around bends. He thrilled to the roar and the whine of the engine he made suffer so. One of his specialties was simultaneous hard braking and downshifting, which required special footwork.

Ferrari's wife, whom he never quite managed not to think of, would have said that the *cowboy de dimanche* performed better in his old BMW than he did elsewhere. Be that as it may, on Sunday mornings Ferrari felt good. It was his only *moment de folie,* and perhaps the only thing he knew of joy. On Sunday mornings, Ferrari felt like somebody. He felt like a *monsieur*.

*

Elisabeth and Alexandra Marius were on their knees in the garden. The rotted peony heads were gone and many of the weeds were going, though the old lady regularly stopped her niece in order to spare what she considered the beautiful wild.

"God blew that savage little seed in here. In another week the stem will go heavy with tiny white flowers." Insects and arachnids almost too small for a human eye worked mutely in the earth.

"I'll be delighted to see them, Aunt. But didn't God also blow in all the other little wild things we've just uprooted?"

"God's word and acts on earth require interpretation, my dear. That's why He has a Church." She ripped out another weed.

"You know," she continued, inconsequentially, "it's easy to see why the ABC team would be composed of the people who are in it. Ferrari seems and poor dead Ernie seemed passive, obedient and monotonously regular. Independent action seems alien to them."

The old lady looked at her pink-edged yellow roses, glowing in late afternoon shade. "And of course Mlle. Plaine – if we count her as part of the company – is almost like a shadow, almost insubstantial. That's not true of beautiful Camille, of course. He has a lot of what you Americans call 'personality.' But in his way he's just as passive: he may think a lot but he says almost nothing. In any case he appears happy to take Léon's orders at work, and to carry them out."

Alexandra stood up and stretched, pushing red-gold hair out of her face with dirty fingers. "So that leaves your curious little group in the hands and at the orders of hearty Boss Léon. I think he loves to be boss and wants to be loved, and thinks if he's the one then he's the other."

"Well," said the girl's aunt, "he's half right."

Belle Légère dropped by and gave the two others the excuse they needed to wash their hands and ask Mme. Radis to prepare tea. Both Mme. Légère and Mme. Radis were relieved to see that their hostess did not intend to make it herself, although not even she could have managed to burn tea.

Belle sat gracefully in a creaking wicker garden *fauteuil* and prepared for a spell of chat. "That vulgar Ferrari fellow – I could hardly believe my eyes – was at the Viscount's picnic yesterday evening. Why would someone like that be invited to the chateau?"

"Oh, don't be such a snob, Belle." Although Alexandra had come to be very fond of Mme. Légère, her aunt's comment caused her to smile.

"You are a snob, of course." Her friend did not protest. "But you needn't flaunt it. From what I've heard of that occasion, there were a number of quite common *invités* – you, of course, were no doubt at the top of the list, above the *hoi polloi,* and poor M. Ferrari was unquestionably at the very bottom. But the Viscount loves race cars, and perhaps he simply likes the fellow. I admit I rather do."

"Nonsense," said the *Parisienne.* "*Le vicomte d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune* is one of the most distinguished gentlemen in the region. His father was a close friend of the

comte de Paris. He has the best collection of old ivories in France. And that little man called Ferrari is utterly *ordinaire.* Are the rest of that dreadful ABC group as boring as he?"

The old lady could not help thinking that her beautiful friend was trying to repair the damage she might have done her reputation by showing, at the time of their first encounter, an interest in men who were beneath her. She refrained from making any such reflection out loud.

"I'm afraid, Alexandra, that our friend Belle thinks the honor and the distinction she detected in her invitation to the chateau have been debased by poor M. Ferrari's presence. And she can't very well complain that the *vicomtesse* and the *vicomte* will invite just anybody into their home .... Belle has a Parisian enthusiasm for ladders. A pity M. Ferrari wasn't made to eat with the servants in the kitchen."

She paused, content with her soft satire, not wanting to draw blood. "In any case, my dear, do tell us about your evening."

Perhaps because the picnic had been spoiled by Ferrari's presence, or for some other reason, Belle Légère did not seem to want to go into more detail. Her eyes flashed to the right, and she changed the subject.

It was Lieutenant Marius who brought the news that Ferrari was dead. Apart from a few spontaneous expressions on the order of *Ah, mon Dieu,* no one spoke for a moment. Then Belle, remembering Dorothy Parker, seized her chance to appear witty.

"How," she said, "can they tell?"

*

Tiny orange ladybugs crawled among the rose thorns in a hecatomb of aphids, making no sound. Green leaves shone and moved in the breeze.

"Nothing," said Lucky Luke, "is known of the circumstances of the accident, but there was a light rain last night and the roads were still a little wet early this morning."

The four went over the known details. "There is often," said Luc, "a silver lining to dark clouds. Apparently, Aunt, I'll be needing to take advantage of your hospitality for some time to come. This second death raises the serious possibility that we're dealing not with two accidents, but with two murders. And probably a single murderer."

His aunt smiled sweetly at him. "Of course it's the same murderer – how many murderers do you think we have here in Fleuré?"

She put a silver teaspoon into her Darjeeling tea. "The two victims worked for the same company. That's a start. Find what else they have in common and you'll have your killer."

*

Lieutenant Marius was not yet administratively free to act exclusively on the assumption that either victim had been murdered, but he had enough independence from his superior to call in an assistant, Thidwick, to help with the investigation.

His aunt looked surprised, and peppered him with questions. "Thidwick? Is that someone new? I've never heard of him. Surely that's not his real name?"

"It isn't, of course. Yes, he is new. His name's an embarrassment to me. He's a powerful man physically but mentally a bit plodding. We usually get along famously, but one day his slowness so exasperated me that I called him Thidwick."

The lieutenant laughed nervously. "It was a moment of pique and of course now I regret it, but the thing stuck. He believes the name is a compliment and is proud of it. I dread the day he discovers the truth." Lucky Luke laughed again.

The Airedale Newton, disturbed by the lieutenant's strange laughter, came into the *salon* and laid his hairy head solemnly on his mistress' knee. She looked down at the dog with similar solemnity. "I should one day make a list of suspects, I suppose," she said, probably not to the dog. "You asked me for one some time ago, and I've never given it."

Mme. Radis was at that moment in the kitchen, but she managed to hear the call for speculation and was wiping her hands on her apron as she came to join the others. "Don't see why anybody needs to be imagining evil," she said. "Lord knows there's enough nastiness in the world without running after it. No reason why that poor man and his poor dog didn't just get run over by some drunk or something. No reason why M. Ferrari didn't just lose control of his car."

Mme. Radis paused, as if to reflect on a certain inconsistency. "'Course it's true, we've got some mean folk around here too." And so, before the four could get to their list, they were five.

*

Mme. Marius was devoted to her friend Belle, but she could neither fail to notice, nor like, the fact that her nephew paid her so much attention. Luc's years of bachelorhood, apparently now coming to an end, had never been incompatible with a keen interest in pretty or charming women, and Belle was both. Elisabeth Marius did not want to see her favorite nephew become Belle's fourth mistake.

Mme. Radis scratched her armpit. "How many men were there in that old bank robbery?"

Luc, having heard a good deal about the inquest years earlier, thought he remembered five, and asked the old woman why she wanted to know.

Murder was now everywhere in the air, and Belle asked about the man who had killed his wife. Lucky Luke, never given to lurid description, was nonetheless prompt to give her the details she wanted.

"His name was Sassin, or Sassan, I think. Everybody here said he loved his wife, that he'd only meant to frighten her."

Belle seemed interested in the story. Luc did not understand why she was asking.

"He sat up all night with her body, then called the police in the morning."

The French doors crashed open and Abélard stumbled fatly in, followed by a meeker, svelter Héloïse. The Airedale and the two cats fairly levitated, and vanished even before the noise had subsided.

Elisabeth Marius had been looking at her kitchen maid.

"Ah," she said. "You too?"

*

Even Belle was shocked at the absence of a religious ceremony for Ferrari. "You see," she said, "he was worthless." Her bright eyes were triumphant.

Elisabeth Marius found her friend's comments disingenuous, coming as they did from someone who never went to Mass, nor lived in keeping with any known church doctrine, although her sins were orthodox. She would, nonetheless and when her time came, no doubt be buried in blessed earth, like most of her adopted-village neighbors.

The *funérarium* was a sinister little place, conceived as it was exclusively for corpses who didn't wish, or didn't dare, to enter a church. A few evergreen shrubs, planted

by and in the insipid style of a "landscape expert," dotted the gravel *environs.* A high chicken-wire fence kept out intruders during the times when no one haunted the place, which was almost all the time. The trim, clean building itself was made of post-modern ticky-tacky.

After the "service," which in the absence of any other direction consisted of the odd reading from Khalil Gibran and his fellows, Camille and Léon lingered on the gravel. Mme. Marius thought each looked pale and distressed, and imagined that the reasons therefor might not be entirely the same as the first time. Even Léon could count.

The service had taken place early in the morning and the sun was still slanting from the East. A sprinkle of rain fell through the light. Léon, whose only defense in life appeared to be a thin shield of heartiness, was trying to keep things as casual as they could be in the circumstances.

"He never got his Ferrari back."

But Léon did not appear to feel well-protected in his three-piece suit. Camille was probably afraid too – how could he not be? – but he also looked moved, as he had at Ernest's funeral. Mme. Marius, watching him from a discreet distance, thought for a moment he was going to cry. Instead, he met Léon's banter.

"He lived by the sports ... scar and he died by the sports ... scar." Even Léon could see that Camille was working hard to be witty. His golden curls had gone so flat in the rain that Mme. Marius began after all to doubt they were natural. Camille was, she thought, perhaps the only person in the world who, apparently, really liked both Ernest and also Ferrari.

Luc walked away from the *funérarium* with his aunt. "It's strange. We couldn't get normal records on Ernie, and now we're having the same problem with Ferrari. We know his name – Frédéric Recque – or at least we know what's supposed to be his name. But we have no information on him." The rain had already stopped.

One day later, the rump of the ABC team was back at work. Léon and Camille spoke little to each other, and seemed to keep a certain distance.

*

The expressionless face of Gorgonzola Plaine was eerily lit. Her eyes were glassy, like the screen she was half-watching. A mute insect hovered in the television light. In what appeared to be utter indifference, she changed channels.

*

Luc Marius was in bed, re-reading an old copy of Rabelais and laughing. He was conscious of the raspiness of his linen sheets. He liked them. He said to himself that, in half an hour, he would put his book down, go out into the night garden, smoke a good cigar and think about the case.

*

Mme. Radis was watching an American thriller on television in her bedroom. She liked it, but would not remember it the next morning. Next to the television set was a ceramic black panther with a lamp coming out of its head.

*

Belle Légère was turning the pages of a photograph album. Her deep eyes brimmed with tears.

*

Léon Toppe parked his dilapidated white car in front of his tenement apartment. He walked to his door, looked around him before entering, and closed the door behind him. Although it was an exterior door, it made a hollow sound. He locked it. The apartment was empty. He turned on the television set and was no longer alone.

*

Alexandra lay in bed awake. The moon lit silhouettes of antique French furniture she had hardly imagined in upstate New York. There was a small engraving of the *musée de Cluny* on the wall opposite her; she remembered it, but could not see it in the dark. She turned her golden head on a feather pillow.

*

Héloïse came out of the bathroom. Her hands were bleeding from too much washing. She looked around her. She was afraid of what people would think.

*

Abélard kept a large bag of candy under his bed. He was reading a comic book, and his mouth was full. Although he was vaguely following the narrative, he would not remember it in the morning. When he reached for the bag, a mouse fled in silence.

*

Mme. Vique sat in front of her mirror and slowly combed her hair. She was growing old.

*

Popeye lit an American cigarette for himself, and another for Olive Oil. They were watching the same Hollywood film to be forgotten the next morning. They sat close to each other.

*

Jean Allonne sat in his great house, listening to a Schubert Impromptu. He rarely listened to music, and had stopped playing the piano a half-century earlier. Like Belle, he had tears in his eyes, but he was happy.

*

M. Jousse was angry with his wife. He spent the evening with his dog.

*

M. Brioche was sleeping punctually. He had to be up and ready to work at two in the morning. He was dreaming a kind of baker's version of *Macbeth*: no amount of washing could remove the flour from his hands.

*

Mme. Vane was sitting up late with her accounts. She made dozens of photocopies and alterations. Her throat was dry.

*

M. Eclaire, full of *crème anglaise,* was snoring so loudly he was disturbing the neighbors. In her nearby bedroom, his wife could not begin to sleep, but she thought his snoring was music.

*

Valentin was restless on his blanket, dreaming of dogs and wheels and his mother, who had died long ago.

*

The *vicomtesse* d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune turned in her cold bed. She had been crying for an hour, without making any sound. It would not have mattered: no one would have heard.

*

M. and Mme. Goudi were sleeping in the same bed, flat on their backs. They were holding hands.

*

Once again Mlle. Cronique could not sleep. She was wondering whether she would have the supple strength necessary to pour out a dish of milk for her cat. The cat was rubbing against her in an intense display of affection. After a century of life, Mlle. Cronique felt she understood the nature of love.

*

François Ahsse was angry in his sleep, and afraid. In his dream, he could never find the answer to the question everyone was asking him.

Chapter 6: The End of Camille

Camille Pierre Richard Cointreau was going about his evening alone, as he seemed destined generally to be. He spent an hour playing Liszt on a very poor piano – he hadn't been in Fleuré long enough, or made enough money, to acquire a good one – and then poured himself another glass of his favorite drink.

Camille had too keen a sense of the ridiculous to be seen in public dressed as he liked to dress, but here, in his small, rudimentary apartment, already being furnished with what he considered taste and finesse, there was no one to laugh at him. He was wearing a scarlet silk shirt open from the neck to the navel. It set off, he thought, his gold necklace and bracelet, and he looked at himself in the mirror only from time to time. His crystal glass in hand, he was studying an album of photographs, the nature of which is perhaps better *passée sous silence.*

The gold was solid, unlike Ernie's plate. Camille had chosen a certain copper-alloy hue that he thought went especially well with his curling hair.

Someone knocked at the door. Camille put down his glass, slipped the album under the worn leather Chesterfield sofa, made himself presentable and went to answer it. The rest of the details of Camille's last evening have not been recorded.

*

Lucky Luke arrived at the scene of the crime accompanied by his aide Thidwick. Whatever the circumstances of the past, impatient exasperation of his superior, the giant assistant had not been employed to think or to understand; he was there to guard and to do heavy work. Apparently insensitive to the horror within, he took his place at the entrance to Camille's apartment and lit a Gauloise cigarette. His bulk at

the doorway was enough to discourage the morning curious from trying to get a look inside.

The lieutenant was immediately struck by the fact that, of the three deaths, Camille's was the only one that was obviously voluntary homicide. It was now more than difficult not to believe that the members of the ABC team were being deliberately killed, one by one, but pains had been taken to conceal the truth about the first two killings; the third death was flagrantly murderous.

Although they did not yet know what Belle Légère might have called the half of it, the newspapers were now recognizing that they had a hot topic, and an alarmed Captain Ahsse saw to it, more than ever, that police priority set up camp in Fleuré. Two of his best forensic experts were already at the scene. Luc's boss was sorry to have placed his subordinate at the center of what was becoming a celebrated case, but the lieutenant was the best investigator available, and the captain consoled himself with the thought that, if things went badly, Lieutenant Marius could be blamed.

The apartment was cordoned with police tape, photographs were taken and evidence was collected, ranging in size from hairs and threads to a photograph album found under the sofa. By noon the grim investigators had locked the door to Camille's apartment and left in silence. Thidwick remained like a huge, forbidding statue at the entrance. The rainclouds had dissipated. The sky was deep, windy blue.

*

White candles flickered and a white hand moved. Half-lit in a corner was a spider with red blotches on its fat black abdomen. It was not possible to tell whether the spider was alive, or dead, or artificial. Two voodoo dolls remained.

*

Luc found the ladies together, like three icons of the Ages of Womanhood: Youth, and the Prime of Age, and Age Itself. They were all silent in horror at the manner of Camille's death. Even Alexandra had understood.

"I believe, Aunt," said her nephew, "that since Camille was killed the way Edward II was killed, his murderer must be – it will help us in our inquest – an unusually cruel or sadistic person."

Mme. Marius blinked, and looked away. "Or," she said, "simply full of hate."

She took matters in hand. Her knowledge of Irish wakes stood her in excellent stead: death called for drink. Mme. Radis had of course heard everything from afar; with her help, the old lady managed to have strong drinks in every hand in moments.

"If he was killed that way," she said, "then he was drugged first. Your forensic tests will show that. And if he was drugged – you say, Luc, there were no signs of a physical struggle?"

"None at all. I suppose in fact he anticipated nothing, and perhaps suffered nothing. It's the only mercy in this case."

"I'm sure you're supposing right. And so it's clear he knew his killer – he let him in, suspecting nothing."

Luc emptied his snifter and took the liberty of pouring his aunt and himself another cognac: Belle had not quite finished hers, and Alexandra had not yet begun. He spoke with professional prudence. "Suspecting nothing, certainly. But why do you speak of the killer as a man? Why not a woman? Assuming all three men have been murdered ..."

Alexandra interrupted. "Assuming? Luc, how can you possibly imagine anything else? Three suspicious deaths all at once, in a village where there's been no murder since I don't know when – and all three victims from the same company!"

Tragedy, or at least human frailty and cruelty, had done nothing to lessen Luc's appreciation of Alexandra's red-gold hair: he thought of Dr Johnson's lucid comment about the death of a friend not spoiling enthusiasm for life – and the dead men had not been his friends. For a moment he simply looked at her, finding a kind of aesthetic consolation in her prettiness. Camille was frail, and his murder was cruel, and Alexandra was delight.

"Well, I was just saying," he continued, "that the murderer is not necessarily a man. Each of the three deaths could have been managed by a woman ...." He turned to his aunt, who was sitting near the garden window in silence. She looked older than she usually did.

"Aunt," he said quietly. "I'd like to know if you think these deaths – these murders – are of a feminine ... type."

Elisabeth Marius smiled weakly and said nothing for some time. Because of their distress, and because of their interest in her answer, no one spoke.

At last she turned to her nephew. "There is of course a kind of feminine or masculine ... signature, or hallmark, to a number of acts, and sometimes to murder. But definitive identification of such things happens only in mystery stories."

She paused again. She had drunk nothing from her second glass. "I should think," she said at last, "that you're right, Luc. Those three poor men may not have been murdered by a woman, but they could have been."

*

M. Jousse's butcher shop was not known for cleanliness. He was installed in one dark corner of it. He was searching in his dog's fur for ticks, occasionally finding one, and squashing it between two fingernails. The dog stood patiently. On a dirty table nearby was a dirty glass, filled with red liquid.

*

Popeye brought his fist down on a table which barely resisted the crash. Olive Oil flinched at the sound. The fist was huge, and joined to a huge forearm and huge biceps.

*

M. Allonne slowly made himself a cup of tea and slowly drank it. There was no sound in his great house: no music, no radio, no television. The phone rarely rang. If it was true that, more than half a century earlier, a number of the people of Fleuré had overtly or covertly resisted the Nazis, some of them dying heroes, others in Fleuré had collaborated.

*

Old Mlle. Cronique had sat down and now could not get up. Her arthritis was keen. Her knees were a hundred years old.

*

Thidwick stood at his post, somber and proud, like a Roman statue. He appeared to be looking at nothing, thinking of nothing.

*

Mme. Radis was delighted. Her mistress had simply not thought about the next meal. She was preparing one of her more modest specialties, *boeuf aux cacahouètes*. As she browned the beef in oil, her wrist flicked with the mechanical expertise of people who know what they are doing.

*

Four sparrows, the color of bark and dust, quarreled in the bushes. The three women and Luc were seated in the garden, finishing their dinner on a June night which was still warm and light. Mme. Marius was lost in one of her favorite pastimes – one that explained, no doubt, why her nephew the criminal investigator so often asked for her opinion: she was watching people watching other people.

More precisely, she was watching someone watch other people. The people were Belle Légère and Alexandra Marius – the middle-aged woman exquisitely conscious of her beauty and of its effect, the younger woman not in the least conscious of the very same things. The someone was of course Luc Marius. His aunt was thinking that, if the cousins married, Alexandra would not have to change her monograms, or even her stationery. It did not occur to her that an American child of Upstate New York might have neither.

But even the old widow's penetrating eye could not detect Luc's preference. He was perfectly attentive to each lady – and, probably, symmetrically happy to find himself between them.

"One thing we'll know," said Belle, "only we maybe won't know it in time." She lit a cigarette. None of the others smoked cigarettes. Luc thought she smoked with style.

"Either Léon Toppe is next on the list, or he's the murderer. It can't be any other way." Her cigarette smoke rose from the warm shadows up into the cherry tree beside them. The last western sun reddened the smoke and the almost ripe cherries.

"Maybe," she said, "he's – what do you call it in English? – bumping the other fellows, in order to inherit the company, or something. I wouldn't put him past it."

Like most people, Luc found this woman magnetic. "Nonetheless," he said, "you should be careful not to assume we have three murders before us, or even only one murderer. I agree that both are, in the light of what we know now, more than probable.

"But in the past I've known one murder to inspire another, one murderer to imitate another – a second, smarter, killer who seizes the chance to drown a single homicide in the generality. I don't think that's the case here, but my aunt long ago taught me to keep an open mind."

The sun sank at last, leaving even the tops of the trees, even the birds, in darkness. Luc enjoyed talking about his aunt to this delicious woman. "Sometimes, she used to tell me, the truth is the least improbable of a collection of impossibilities."

The Airedale began to growl. Thidwick entered the garden and waited politely at a distance for his boss's attention. He looked liked an enormous teddy bear, left in the corner by some forgetful infant Gargantua. Luc called him over and introduced him. The dog, reassured, lay down again at his mistress' feet, but kept a nervous watch on the giant newcomer. Ill-at-ease, Thidwick held his police cap in his hands and bowed before each woman. He appeared to be twice as tall and six times as heavy as Mme. Marius.

"*Patron,*" he said, handing Luc an envelope, "this came from the lab." Luc had given up telling him to say "lieutenant" and not *patron;* change was difficult for Thidwick. All four spectators remained silent while Luc excused himself and read the report.

The day birds had stopped singing. A bat flitted past one of the streetlights. From the nearby forest came the hoot of an owl.

The lieutenant looked up, frustrated. "We're not going to advance much on the basis of this report. The laboratory has so far found scraping, and faint traces of nitric acid, on the brake lines of Ferrari's car. But the scraping could have occurred during the crash, and for reasons that escape me apparently the presence of nitric acid can be explained in a number of ways, most of them not criminal."

Mme. Radis, under the instructions of her mistress, was preparing a glass of *pastis* for the gentle giant.

"Let's assume," said Mme. Marius, "what's obvious, or probable. Given three murders and one murderer, why would the killer go to so much trouble to disguise the first two killings when the third was to be flagrant? Surely none of the killings was spontaneous or unpremeditated."

Mme. Radis passed the glass of icy, cloudy liquid to the lieutenant's aide, who took it in his big hand with exaggerated gratitude.

"That," said Luc, "could be an argument for the existence of two different killers."

Thidwick bowed again, to each person in the room, and emptied his glass at a go.

Mme. Radis, dressed in orange and pink, prepared another glass, only half full, hesitated, caught her employer's eye and kept it near her for a respectable time. This was not hypocrisy on the part of Thidwick's hostess, nor of course an absence of generosity: it was mercy, and personal experience.

"These murders are certainly pre-meditated," she said. "They're even 'poetic,' as people sometimes say – each victim's end is fitted to the way he lived. One might particularly use the expression in the case of poor Camille."

Prudently, Mme. Radis handed the glass to her mistress, who handed it to her nephew, who handed it to his aide, who had been waiting for it, at the end of the chain, in silent patience, rather like the watchful Airedale lying nearby. Again, he drained it at one go.

The night was still warm but a sudden western wind threatened rain. Linen napkins were blown off the table and the leaves of the old locust trees whooshed. The party moved hurriedly indoors. Amidst the clinking of glasses, the moving of garden furniture and the securing of open windows, conversation, or at least discussion, was interrupted. Thidwick was so eager to help that he knocked over a large table and broke an ashtray. Mme. Radis assured the miserably penitent giant that it was a thing of no importance. Belle, Alexandra and Lucky Luke laughed in the lightning breeze.

The first drops fell before they finished clearing the garden. By the time they were set up in the *salon,* the sudden rain was pouring at stiff angles. Thidwick sat in the corner on what appeared under him to be a fragile chair, next to the dog, who had decided the giant was a friend. The big man, from his oblique corner, stared at the orange maid. There was general silence in the room, and then Luc returned to the inevitable subject.

"Disguising murder one and murder two meant that, at first, people – I mean not only the police, but future victims – were not forewarned, not on their guard."

The wind banged open a window, drenching flying drapes. Mme. Marius, who was nearest, moved toward it, but Luc was quicker. "So now," he asked, "is there no one left to warn? In that case Léon would indeed seem to be the principal suspect."

The old lady looked out at the rain falling into her garden. She looked at the ancient, polished wood of the end table, on which she had left a worn leather volume of the poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

"The rain," she said, "is full of ghosts tonight."

*

The bridges of Paris were obscured in rainy fog. Along the Seine, some of the booksellers had given up and gone home.

It was closing time in the *Archives Nationales,* and the moody clerk was impatient for his last "client" to leave the premises and free him to go home. *"Allez, allez, madame ; il est presque dix-sept heures."*

Elisabeth Marius fixed him with cold blue eyes. *"Vous êtes,"* she said, *"une personne très désagréable."*

*

Late at night, Léon Toppe stumbled out of one of the Fleuré cafés – precisely the kind of village café Elisabeth Marius and Belle Légère had warned Alexandra about. He was wearing a three-piece suit, too disheveled to have the effect he would have liked. With him was the sad, attentive widow, Mme. Vique. She appeared less drunk, at least, than her escort: she was on his arm, but in fact supporting him. She was constantly attentive, but she did not smile. No one in Fleuré, perhaps, could remember Mme. Vique smiling.

*

The Airedale had fallen in love with Thidwick. It sat at the man's large feet and watched him with attentive brown eyes. The huge aide sat awkwardly at Mme. Marius's midnight kitchen table, drinking, as he never would have done of his own initiative, a cup of tea, and watching Mme. Radis very much as the dog was watching him. Mme. Radis was happy.

*

M. and Mme. Eclaire had stayed up to watch an old black-and-white film they remembered from their youth; black-and-white films could be seen on television only at odd or late hours. Now, their faces lit by the eerie tube, they closed their day. Mme. Eclaire put a few of her husband's pastries under netting, to protect them from flies. Silently and slowly, they walked upstairs to their bedrooms.

*

In the family *château,* the *vicomte* and the *vicomtesse d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune* did not have separate bedrooms; they had separate wings. At a moment when the moon could scarcely be seen among night clouds, the Viscount gently closed a bedroom door.

*

The ancient Mlle. Cronique lay in her bed awake: the pain in her hips deprived her every night of normal sleep. She was thinking about her grandmother, born in the days of French kings, and she was happy.

*

M. Vane had been snoring for hours, enjoying sleep that would not come to his wife. She sat at their bedroom window. The waning half-moon could rarely be seen through the rainclouds.

Chapter 7: Fanning the Flames

In spite of their culinary mediocrity, Mme. Marius's Sunday repasts were an object of envy in Fleuré, and her celebrated *dîner du solstice* was an occasion for outright competition: some of the inhabitants of Fleuré were invited every year, others had been invited once, and many, to their chagrin, had never been. This year's summer solstice dinner, held a little sadly in the *grande salle à manger* because of the rain, featured one of the widow's specialties, *cramé de veau aux morilles.* Although English was often spoken, out of courtesy to Alexandra, who may no longer have required it, all the other guests were French.

Luc Marius laughed noisily. He was as usual even more conscious of the ladies around him than he was of the food in his plate, but he was heartened by the *entrée:* a *foie gras demi-cuit,* pink and raw and luscious in its center. He knew why the *entrée* was a success: his aunt often simplified her life by purchasing prepared dishes from the Restaurant de l'Hôtel du Nord, the best restaurant in nearby Compiègne, perhaps in the region. Its owner and chef, René Renard, was a blessing to Mme. Marius's table.

Lucky Luke laughed again, and lifted his glass of heady old sauternes in silent tribute to René. His aunt had not ruined this *entrée,* and had not even tried to save money, as well as trouble, with the cheap *pâté de foie gras* she sometimes bought at the nearby, ugly supermarket. Luc's aunt's budget was limited but, when she needed to avoid expense, she usually had the sense to buy good qualities of modest products, rather than cheap versions of luxury. On the occasion of the *dîner du solstice,* she had chosen both good quality and *produits de luxe.*

This particular solstice coinciding with Mme. Radis' day off, her employer had initially tried to engage the services of poor Mlle. Plaine. She, however, was already taken in one of her numerous "grey market" jobs, and the old widow had settled on another of Léon Toppe's ladies, Mme. Vique. Mme. Radis was fond of Mme. Vique: although the old maid was exasperated to have been prevented once again from preparing a fine meal herself, she had returned early in order to give Mme. Vique a hand.

Mme. Marius was a mistress of the art of seating guests, as she was of a number of other arts. The tables, in the form of made-to-order scalene triangles, were joined at such odd angles that it was not possible to identify the head, the foot or even, in traditional French style, the middle. Married couples were of course separated.

Blithe Alexandra was surrounded by the English-speakers she no longer very much needed. Not by chance, and to their mutual delight, she and Luc had been placed side by side. They talked and laughed together as much as their duties to their fellow guests permitted, and perhaps a trifle more.

On what was perhaps a not entirely disinterested impulse of indulgence, Mme. Légère had been seated at the side of Charles d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune. Belle would have been flirting and glowing even if Charles had not been the rich aristocrat he was, but of course, given these facts, she was glowing more. The Viscount, because he was also witty and handsome, united the four qualities the beautiful divorcée held most dear.

Mme. Marius had hesitated, then finally placed M. Eclaire opposite herself – in part to honor his age, in part not to disappoint him, in part because she couldn't find anywhere else to put him. The old man was making timid eyes at her. His wife, from the other end of the table, seemed as vaguely aware of and happy with her husband's flirtation as the *vicomtesse* was apparently unconscious of that of her own, though in the latter case the danger was considerably greater.

M. Vane, often interrupting, French-style, and talking with his mouth full, kept up a stream of *désobligeants* comments on the United States. Alexandra, however, had been seated at a relatively safe distance, and nobody appeared to be listening much to him. Mme. Vane, at her own distant triangle, was lost in a description of her charitable organizations: the local marching band and its troupe of teenage baton-twirlers, the local save-our-trees-and-butterflies club and the committee for the restoration of the medieval church roof. People often gave her money to pacify her.

M. Allonne, ancient and courteous, isolated in his hallmark of remote sadness, sat like a portrait out of Rembrandt. Seated across the table, both Alexandra and Luc included him in their conversation. Unwittingly he heightened their sense of privilege in each other's company.

The conversation turned around the morning's sermon – a discourse on the seven deadly sins, and particularly on sloth, which Mme. Marius, Alexandra and Luc had found both profound and brilliant, like a shining precious stone. M. and Mme. Goudi had been shocked by the sermon, and Belle had been nothing at all, since she hadn't been present.

"I sink," said Mme. Goudi, "eat ease better to speak of sea gentle, kind, soft sings. To remind us sat God ease love. I add eard so mush about zees prees, and I ave been disappoint."

"Nonsense, my dear," said her hostess, speaking from a distant time. "God is love is not enough. We live these days in a swamp of Sensitivity and Love. Father Alexandre – we would have had your kind of sermon if our *curé* hadn't been on retreat – Father Alexandre spoke of the sin in us, and of justice. God is love indeed – you yourself are lovely proof of that – although He is perhaps not always the *nice* love we generally imagine. But sin is sin."

It occurred to Elisabeth Marius that she was both drinking too much and talking too seriously for a *dîner mondain.* She took another slice of her own *foie gras* from the silver platter held by Mme. Vique.

"Nonezeless," said Mme. Goudi, "I found sea sermon razzer disturbing."

"Good," said her hostess. Luc laughed. M. and Mme. Eclaire, from their opposite ends of the tables, struggled to agree with everyone.

The Viscount was so lost in conversation with Belle that he hadn't followed a word of the predominant discussion. M. Allonne smiled, and seemed absent. A nonplussed M. Vane was now finding fault with Chicago gangland slayings, which he appeared to think were daily occurrences in that city; Alexandra, who had learned to cope with him, was now agreeing with everything he said so vigorously that his comments fell flat.

The burnt taste of the veal was hardly noticeable: Mme. Radis had profited from her mistress' habitual inattention to apply another of her remedies.

Luc laughed again, too loudly. The wine was delicious, and it is a rare young man who can resist the combination of fine wine and ladies.

The widow was distressed to have thirteen people present, and hoped no one would notice. Father Alexandre had been invited to the solstice dinner; he would have been an ornament to her table. Always a courteous and thoughtful man, he had nevertheless cancelled that very Sunday morning, just before Mass, pleading a colleague gravely ill. The excuse was of course irreproachable, but his abandoned hostess had not been able to think of anyone appropriate whom she knew well enough to invite at the last moment.

She now consoled herself by contemplating her nephew, so far from Belle and close to his beautiful *cousine*. Belle, in turn – she was not the sort of woman to pine over

a missing man – continued to find solace galore in the glowing Viscount. The two were flirting ever more vivaciously, and with small regard for the others. It was difficult to say whether the Viscountess, from her other side of the room, was still unaware of what was happening, or simply indifferent to it.

The conversation turned to the recent village deaths.

"Do your investigation of seas unappy murders give result, M. Marius?" Mme. Vane never shied from direct, if fractured, questions.

Luc laughed. "The deaths are not yet, madame, official murders, although I grant that they appear to be such. I am not, however, at liberty to divulge details of the inquest."

Mme. Vane was silenced for the moment, but there were few timid people at the table. Her husband took up the charge. "These poor dead people," he said in French, "are all foreigners." He used the word – *étrangers* – often employed in the village for anyone not from it. "Surely the murderer, whoever he is, is a foreigner too. The people of our village rarely kill anybody, and never kill strangers."

"I am not sure," said his hostess, "that what you say is true, monsieur. Murder is always an exceptional act. It will not do to look for typical murderers."

Mme. Eclaire turned her empty head to old M. Allonne. "What is your opinion, monsieur?" The conversation had reverted to French.

The opinion of such an ancient and taciturn inhabitant of Fleuré was so little expected that most of the table went silent.

The old man turned solemnly to his table companion. "There are evil people, madame, everywhere. There are evil people here."

*

Mme. Vique presented the warm silver chafing dish of fresh green beans to her employer who, while taking a small second helping, said to her, "You didn't know the ABC people, did you?" Mme. Vique looked middle-aged and tired. She looked to the right and said *"Non, madame."*

The widow was in fact thinking of the three dead men, but she was embarrassed not to have remembered the rumors that connected the woman to Léon Toppe. It was not like her to make such a mistake.

Belle joined the conversation. "They weren't elegant people, except one, who was rather too elegant."

"No," said Alexandra, staring into her glass. "I don't suppose they were elegant, but they were God's children too."

A door crashed open. A pale girl quietly followed her fat brother from the kitchen, where the two had just consumed one miniscule and one very large helping of hamburgers and potato chips; the girl had in fact left almost all her meal to her brother. They were on their way to their aunt's video room, newly stocked with the most tempting Hollywood entertainment an old lady was likely to imagine: there was no television reception anywhere in the house, but there were at least compensatory videocassettes. The girl was too shy to say anything or look at anyone, and the boy seemed otherwise occupied.

The Viscount smiled at his beautiful companion and resumed the conversation. "They were God's children, certainly. But it is difficult to believe, my dear, that they came from so close to Him as certain other creatures."

This time it was Mme. Eclaire who laughed. Not appearing to doubt the reference, Belle Légère beamed.

*

"Maybe if you didn't spend so much time praying to get my job you'd have at least enough to do yours." Captain Ahsse was beside himself, which was not a good place to be. The local, the regional and now even the national newspapers and broadcasts were full of the serial murders the police appeared unable to fathom.

François Ahsse lit one of his cigarettes – not, thought Luc, one of the superbly stinking Gauloises his compatriots still sometimes smoked, but a more modern, banal American *blonde,* which smelled like burning kleenex. The French lieutenant decided to wait for more pleasant circumstances before lighting his own Punch Punch.

Captain Ahsse was more afraid than angry. He offered his lieutenant all the resources, in budget and in personnel, that he could possibly need or desire, and told him that if he did not solve the case within a week, he would be removed from it. Luc Marius being obviously the best available officer for the job, neither man took the threat seriously.

*

Camille Pierre Richard Cointreau's funeral was as discreet and ordinary as the man himself.

"One of the reasons these men are all buried in Fleuré, Aunt, is that there's something wrong with their identity papers, which of course is making everything else about them suspicious. None of them appears to have a birthplace, or more exactly the birthplace of each, like the *carte d'identité* itself, has been falsified. This appears to be true of Léon Toppe as well, though not of Mlle. Plaine. There isn't anywhere else to bury these people. I think the town hall is exasperated, having to use scarce plots for outsiders."

"How sad," said the old lady, "to have no true place to be buried, no place of one's own." She was standing in the medieval church, listening to the rain, watching it trickle down an interior corner of the southwest wall, against which the western wind blew hardest. As a counter-weight to the banality of the services, she often concentrated on an aspect of the almost ramshackle pile that was the church of Fleuré: an *arc brisé,* a bit of leftover stained glass that had not disappeared in the wars, a stone lintel.

"Still, an ancient village like this one is a better place for a grave than some." She looked around her, at the church filling with a number of people she knew and a great many people she did not. Reporters were standing on the church benches, cameras flashing. "I suppose when you've found out where they really came from, you'll have found out everything."

Camille's funeral flabbergasted the villagers. Whether or not he had seen his death coming, he had left instructions: several airs from Verdi were sung by a huge, impeccably-dressed, handsome black baritone, who could not have seemed more unusual in Fleuré if he had arrived by flying saucer. Chopin's funeral march, played with plastic sadness on a battery-powered boombox, accompanied them all along the short walk up to the cemetery in the pouring rain. The latest hit tune would have seemed much more normal to the locals.

Mme. Marius, as she often did, was thinking aloud with her friend Belle. "Poor Camille never had, and never would have had, many friends in Fleuré – only a few of the wrong ones." The rain beat down on their big black umbrella. There was no wind.

"But even during his short stay here he found a degree of acceptance he wouldn't have found everywhere, you understand."

Belle Légère, dressed in greys that came as close to mourning clothes as most people ever any more did, stared at her remarkable old friend. She did not understand at all.

"Acceptance, I mean, in the literal sense of the word: Camille was just here, as a kind of fact. Indeed, there are many more people for this funeral of a passionate man than there were for Ernest's or Ferrari's, although of course it's hard to know how many are here simply for the now-flaming scandal."

Standing at the side of the grave, they could look down into the valley at the irregular streets of their village below. "Nonetheless, many of our neighbors are here, as they so often are at funerals, not out of some lugubrious or sensational impulse, but because Camille lived in Fleuré, and so do they."

The casket was lowered into its muddy hole, some words were spoken and the crowd dispersed. Belle and Alexandra walked off together. Moving slowly down the hill with his aunt, Luc Marius mentioned to her that his superior was angry with his lack of progress in the case, and jealous, and afraid that he, Luc, was after his captain's job.

His aunt looked up at him. "Are you?" The rain drilled on umbrellas all around.

"Of course I am. I suppose I'm at fault for letting such a thing be seen, though he'd have imagined it even if it weren't true.

"Strictly speaking, I wouldn't even be taking Ahsse's job – he just doesn't want to see me promoted faster than he is. Maybe one day I'd end up his boss." He looked at his aunt. "For his sake, I hope that never happens.

"All of that complicates my work here, because I'm under pressure to get results unusually fast. I need time to get to the bottom of things." Luc laughed nervously.

The aunt reflected that her nephew rarely laughed his strange laugh when he was alone with her. She smiled at him. "One can hardly blame M. Ahsse," she said, "for his impatience. Every few days you don't get to the bottom, somebody else dies."

*

Mme. Marius was more than a little surprised to see Léon Toppe ready to return to work in her cellar on the very day of his colleague's funeral. When she found him waiting at the side door, Léon greeted her with his usual robustness. The old widow thought he looked tired, and that his smile was too vigorous.

For the first time, he was accompanied by both Mme. Vique and Mlle. Plaine, and he was unusually attentive to each. It occurred to his client that he had no one else left to be attentive to. As they approached their place of work, Léon held the cellar door for the two women. Mme. Vique was closer and would normally have gone first, but

Mlle. Plaine pushed forward, and Mme. Vique stepped back. Léon looked vaguely confused. For some hours, the three worked, sometimes silently, sometimes with thumps and the shriekings of power drills.

Mme. Marius was perplexed. She understood Léon's attentiveness, if only in terms of loneliness, but she did not understand his apparent good mood. It did not make much sense if he was in extreme danger of becoming the fourth victim: such an absence of fear appeared to justify speculation that he was himself the murderer. But in that case a transparent Léon would be stupider than he seemed really to be.

She prepared the tea, and poured herself a solitary cup in the *salon* before calling the workers to theirs, in the Music Room. Perhaps fakery was an essential part of Léon Toppe's character.

Eating biscuits and sipping tea – the widow was drinking more of it than usual, and had selfishly or thoughtlessly offered nothing else to the others – Léon continued his gallantries. He passed the *gateaux bretons.*

Mme. Marius, in the next room, came quietly across the terra cotta tile floor and stood near the door, holding a large porcelain dish she had never liked. Léon was laughing heartily at whatever dull, very small talk Mlle. Plaine was making. Mme. Vique was smiling faintly.

The dish exploded on the tile floor like a terrorist bomb. Léon was so startled that he spilled his tea all over the table, and all over Mlle. Plaine. It was impossible to tell whether Mlle. Plaine was surprised by the noise, or by the tea.

Some time later, Elisabeth Marius looked out her *salon* window at the pouring rain and her now marshy garden. Her best roses were rotting, next to the useless sundial.

"Truth," she thought, "will out."

Chapter 8: Unfortunate Miss Plaine

Perhaps these were not, strictly speaking, the ABC murders after all.

The time was just after 2 a.m. Thidwick's huge and silent outline rose out of the Picardy fog. He was standing watch not far from the door of Léon Toppe's ugly modern apartment. The streetlights from the desolate, half-empty parking lot vaguely illuminated the façade, but there was no nearer light. The ill-painted door opened and Mlle. Plaine emerged, alone.

She took two or three steps in the direction of her rusty old car. Her footsteps were slow, her feet almost dragging. A bullet transpierced her head. As far as anyone was ever able to tell, she died simply and mutely, without apparent reaction, just as she had lived.

*

"This," said Lieutenant Marius, "muddies all our waters. Mlle. Plaine was not supposed to drown in this particular river." His aunt, as was often her wont, sat listening in silence, in her window seat. A few damp birds shivered in the wet bushes. Luc wanted to light one of his Punch Punches but, in his aunt's *salon,* he dared not ask.

"There is of course a tenuous ABC connection. Mlle. Plaine 'belonged' to ABC, or at least to Léon, and you say she even worked with them – or what was left of them." He put the unlit cigar into his mouth.

"There could be, however," he said, "another explanation, which is that the dowdy thing was simply mistaken for Léon."

"Light your cigar, Luc," said his aunt. She was watching the rain fall steadily into the garden. "You look silly standing there with a cold cigar in your mouth. You know I don't dislike the smell, and the *salon* is large."

The Latin smoke curled through the room. "Mlle. Plaine," said Luc, "was almost as tall as Léon. She wasn't as ... broad as he, but she was wearing an unbuttoned raincoat, which would have obscured and enlarged her silhouette."

Luc checked his cigar: the coal was symmetrical. "And the light over Léon's door had been smashed. The local kids vandalize traffic lights and apartment lights, but maybe the killer broke this one. I suppose we'll never know. Thidwick says that the lights were also smashed in the area where the gunman must have hidden. There were no real footprints – I have the impression the killer wore thick plastic bags over his shoes. But surely it would have been more practical for him to have a light over Léon's door ...."

"Why," said his aunt, "was there no police protection for Léon?"

"Because he refused it – which surprised me. Anyway, there was protection, more or less: Thidwick was posted nearby for the entire seven-hour night – as much to watch his movements as to protect him. The fellow is miserable with his sense of failure. He blames himself for Mlle. Plaine's death."

The widow Marius had not stopped looking at the rain outside her bay window. "These are the deaths of people I hardly know," she said, as if speaking to the elements, "and I don't know why I should be so moved. But I feel shame for the village, and most of all sorrow, great sorrow, for what is becoming a butchery of our fellows."

Her nephew looked at her without speaking.

"How the sick leaves reel down in throngs." She paused, then quoted again.

"Down their carved names the raindrop ploughs."

*

The day progressed, the weather did not, and the front door was always unlocked. Luc left his wet raincoat, umbrella and hat in the vestibule and entered the empty *salon.*

"Aunt Elisabeth?" No one in the *salle à manger,* not a Radish in the kitchen. In the Music Room, not even the grand piano was open: its huge wooden cover lay flat over silent strings. The ivory keys were covered with a purple felt cloth.

He found his aunt and Alexandra in the video room, watching an old Agatha Christie film, *The Mirror Crack'd.* Luc smiled, kissed his aunt and his cousin and, when she stopped the film, urged them to continue.

Mme. Marius left the film off. "There are so many silly mystery stories, on film and on paper. I quite like this one because it's plausible. I don't know what its origin was, but it could have been based on a true story."

She turned to Alexandra. "You'll see in the end, my dear. The trick is not so much to find the answer as to find the question."

She smiled. "As you Americans and our friend Belle say, most of us spend our time – sometimes our entire lives – barking up the wrong tree."

"I think," said Luc, "that Mlle. Plaine must have been up one of those trees."

*

Lucky Luke, like a number of men, thought better with a cigar in one hand and a glass in the other. His aunt had provided Very Special Old Pale cognac, and was joining him in spite of her newfound emphasis on tea. Feeling that the Fleuré murders were becoming more mysterious instead of less, aunt and nephew concentrated their thoughts.

"Mlle. Plaine wasn't necessarily in the wrong tree, my boy. She was apparently 'connected,' in her way, to at least one of the ABC people, and there is a great deal we don't know about her."

"That's true," her nephew agreed. "In his deposition, Léon admitted to 'a relationship' with the poor thing. I confess I can't imagine what attracted him."

Elisabeth Marius swirled her brandy snifter, and studied the oily film the cognac left on the crystal walls.

"I remember being very offended once – it was a long time ago, and I was young and easy to shock. Some man, speaking of women, said 'They all look the same upside down.' I imagine that's more or less the way Léon Toppe saw Mlle. Plaine."

She took a swallow of the cognac and moved its liquid fire around in her mouth. "In any case, I'm not sure her death was a mistake. She could have been on the ABC list, just like the others."

They were entering serious discourse: Lucky Luke poured two more pale amber glassesful. "It makes a great deal of difference. Mlle. Plaine's death almost certainly disculpates Léon. Thidwick has assured us that the man was in his apartment at the time of the killing – there was only the one door. I suppose he could have climbed out of and back into a window, but that's hardly plausible – to say nothing of how he could have managed to go out while Mlle. Plaine was still in the apartment. And there were no signs of such a maneuver."

He drained the snifter. The cigar was smooth, spicy and cool. "So either the killer took that drab woman for Léon, or he wanted her dead along with the others. In either case, Léon does not appear to be our man."

"Apparently not."

"And there's another thing. We're probably up against a real professional – and as far as I can tell, Léon is no professional. Think of it, *ma tante*: the killer successfully concealed himself, even in the near presence of a police guard. He shot one, perfectly placed bullet within seconds of the appearance of his victim – so quickly, perhaps, that he mistook his victim. Then he disappeared without a trace."

The old lady looked up at her tall nephew. "Luc, now it is you who are speaking of the killer as a man. Does it no longer occur to you that it might be a woman?"

The lieutenant was a little nonplussed. He laughed nervously. "Such skill with firearms ... and the necessary sang-froid ...."

Elisabeth Marius placed the crystal snifters and the ashtray on a platter and made her exit toward the kitchen. "How naive you can be, my boy."

*

There was, from time to time, a customer in *De Temps en Temps*. The antique shop had belonged to Mlle. Cronique since the war – that is, since 1944. Usually it was closed. The proprietor could sometimes be seen hobbling among the stacks of precious junk that filled the several rooms of the premises, but even then she often failed to answer a knock at her locked door; perhaps she simply did not hear it. She moved from pile to pile, maneuvering on two old wooden canes, arranging Things according to a system no one understood, or would ever try to understand.

Anna Cronique was in fact as devoted to her strange collection of objects as she was reluctant to sell them. Like a more articulate version of Valentin, she would not condescend to do commerce with riff-raff. She preferred clients who had time to talk, and knew what they were talking about.

Early one summer morning, Elisabeth Marius could be seen emerging from this shop. In her arms she held precisely the things she was known to enjoy: a small crystal vase, an old silver dish and a piece of old lace. She also carried a stack of old newspapers, held together by a string.

Long after she had left, Mlle. Cronique could be seen standing in her doorway, leaning on her canes, as if she were meditating on her recent visitor, or on the rain.

*

As the dim sun rose higher, pearly and wet, two figures could be seen braving the weather for a walk along a road leading out of the village. Under a big, multicolored umbrella, held high, were a very large person and a much smaller one, the latter dressed in electric green and wearing yellow running shoes. The two persons were holding hands.

*

Far above the village, in his empty manor, Jean Allonne stood at a window musing, like the antiquarian, on ceaselessly falling rain.

*

Old M. Eclaire was humming a tune so badly that it was not possible to recognize it. Rich when he retired, he had installed professional ovens in his large kitchen, which enabled him to play *pâtisserie* as other people play chess, or a sonata. With a vigor

that belied his years, he was rolling out pastry dough. From time to time his quick fingers sprinkled a little more flour onto the damp paste.

*

The time was after ten p.m. and night was falling at last. M. Jousse, accompanied by a limping dog, looked around and entered his butcher shop. He was carrying a large bag which contained something apparently heavy.

*

In the thickening dusk, Valentin walked along the street that had been the scene of the death of Ernie and his dog. The rainclouds were breaking and the moon had risen. Its light caught Valentin's handsome face. He swayed, and he looked drunk, although he was not: as usual, he had not found anyone in the village willing to give him drink, or give him money, which came to the same thing. He was, however, thanks to the many neighbors who looked after him, well dressed.

He stood at the side of the street and intoned the same words, like a litany. "Eddug. Eddug."

*

The rain fell steadily on the dark forest, on the old French village, on the garden and the long stone house. Although she normally saved it as a pastime for winter evenings, Elisabeth Marius was at work on a complicated embroidery, started years and hundreds of hours earlier. It was woman's work: handiwork that permitted conversation.

Alexandra sat opposite her in an armchair by a good lamp, simpler knitting in her hands. The electric light gave her remarkable hair a copper-gold color it did not exactly have in natural light.

"The first day I came here, Aunt, I was bemused, and a little afraid. I remember you offered me TGFOP tea some wealthy friend of yours had given you. I thought you were talking about some government agency: TGFOP – The Government Foreign Office Policies, maybe. We seemed to have nothing in common."

Her aunt looked at her briefly but continued to work. "Nonsense, my dear. We both knew the sun rises in the East, birds sing, dinner follows lunch, and tea is drunk in cups."

It occurred to the American that, in New York, she had put her tea bags into mugs.

Her aunt smiled. "The only difference is that now we have *more* in common."

Chapter 9: The Fourth of July and the Fifth Man

The cream oozed luxury and the perfume of rich coffee. There is an art of true pastry, so far removed from the world of the cardboard-industrial pastry complex that those who know only the latter can have no idea of the former. This was pastry that made one glad to be alive.

"It's love pastry," said Lucky Luke with his mouth full. "You seem, Aunt, to be his *raison d'être,* his source of inspiration, his *joie de vivre.* And his wife appears almost grateful to you, which perhaps she should be. *Le père* Eclaire is probably a much more agreeable man than he would be without you."

"That's all very well," said his aunt, her mouth not full, "as long as he doesn't get carried away. I've never been fond of people who get carried away."

She removed a Paris-Brest from the recently-acquired silver dish. "In any case, you should be grateful too, since you're enjoying these *pâtisseries d'amour* at least as much as I am."

Belle Légère and Alexandra entered the vestibule, laughing and shaking rain from their umbrella.

"Well," said Belle, "we tried. We walked as far as the town hall before the rain came back in force." As is often, if mysteriously, the case, the two women seemed exhilarated by their encounter with violent elements.

Alexandra plumped down onto the sofa with a heaviness a French lady would not have permitted herself, and kissed her cousin on the cheek. Her smile and her natural grace dissipated the clumsiness.

"I think, Luc," she said, as if she were making an announcement, "that maybe not all these deaths are murders. No one's thought of that."

Belle sat delicately down in a *fauteuil*, watching the two cousins closely. Elisabeth Marius passed her a dessert plate and a silver fork.

"And *I* think, Luc, that there may be more than one killer." Belle's cheekbones were high and prominent. Her dark brown hair curled a little around her face. Her neck and hands were long and elegant.

"Over the years I have become expert in ... variety and, let us say, in multiplicity, which is not of course to say duplicity. Had I very much disliked Miss Plaine, I

would have found the present moment ideal for ... acting – precisely as you described, Luc, some days ago."

Luc studied each of the three ladies. "Talking with you," he said, "is useful. Women sometimes see things I don't." It was not clear to whom was he speaking.

"Such as, for example," said his aunt, "those subtle women who can shoot well."

Luc looked a little uncomfortable. "Such as they," he admitted. His cousin's hair was red, or *roux,* or gold, according to language, light and mood.

"And women," continued his aunt, "are sometimes filled with monomaniacal passion that can create, or lead to, a sort of competence – although no doubt that's true of men too. In any case, whoever's doing this seems devoted to the job."

Elisabeth Marius's portable computer sat glowing on an eighteenth-century table which was shining in its own wooden way. Standing near it, Luc could see she had been running a name-search under "T."

"If you find anything on him, Aunt, be sure to let me know immediately. Our own sources are rarely complete."

Mme. Marius looked at him without answering, and served the tea brought to her by a radiant red Radish.

*

"I can't lunch with you today, Luc. I'm going to Paris."

Her lanky nephew found solace in one of the last love pastries. "You just went to Paris a few days ago. What do you do all day there?" Again, and like a good many French people, he was speaking with his mouth full.

"I go shopping. I go to the *Archives Nationales* and to the *Bibliothèque Nationale.* You know I study history. In any case, there's little to miss here in this dreadful weather – not, at least, if I could persuade you to come with me."

Luc liked the invitation, but could hardly have accepted it before his mission was finished.

"Sometimes I take Alexandra with me. We lunch at the Grand Véfour. It looks like a royal whorehouse, but I remember a dish of poached oysters there that, during a hard period in my life, helped restore my faith in God."

Luc looked at his old aunt and thought of the sadness of a future life without her, after her death. He had never known another woman – or person – so pleasant and so interesting. The comment about oysters and God might have struck someone who knew Elisabeth Marius less well as a joke, and in bad taste. Lucky Luke knew it was neither.

The old lady went on. "And I haven't encountered such attentive, discreet service since the old days on the Queen Mary. Whenever I look around my table at the Grand Véfour, there's nary a waiter to be seen. But I have only to think of something I might wish for, and it arrives with crystal alacrity."

Luc loved to listen to his aunt talk, and reminisce, especially about that most fetching of ocean liners, but he forbore on this occasion to prompt her, if only because of Mme. Vique's unexpected and emotional arrival.

*

The knock on the door was so feeble that only Alexandra heard it. Poor dead Miss Plaine had at least had the distinction of being rather tall; Mme. Vique had only the distinction of having none: medium height, mouse-colored hair, forgettable features. Even her clothes were nondescript: neither the elegance of Belle Légère nor the hearty vulgarity of Mme. Radis. She was in fact dressed like most people in the village, which is to say, badly and unremarkably.

Her face, however, was for once memorable. It seemed to be a fusion of mute misery, helplessness and dread. It impressed everyone in the room. She walked to the lieutenant and, in a shaking voice, told him of her fear for herself and for "Mr. Léon."

"Would it be possible, *Mo'sieur le policier*," – she apparently had no idea how to speak to an officer, or even of the difference between *la police* and *la gendarmerie* – "to have protection, before we too are killed?" Extremely ill at ease, she turned her eyes from the lieutenant as she spoke. Her hands and her voice were shaking.

Luc gave what assurance he could. Alexandra was sorry for her. Elisabeth Marius and Mme. Radis stared at her, discreetly.

*

Mlle. Plaine's funeral was not in Fleuré; her body was sent to her native Ardennes. In the village, the lack of any form of ceremony left her death like an unhealed wound; she had, after all, unlike the preceding corpses, belonged to the village for many years.

Elisabeth Marius returned from another visit to her beloved *Archives Nationales.* She sat up late with her old books and magazines.

She drank a cup of midnight tea with Mme. Radis. The two old friends talked of village things, past and present: the absence of any relatives, or even friends, to accompany Mlle. Plaine's body to her burial-place; M. Allonne's withdrawal from almost all village life; the old bank robbery; Ernie's death. Mme. Radis wondered what had happened to the dog.

"How strange," said Mme. Marius; "none of us have thought of that. I suppose they just threw the cadaver into the trash."

Mme. Radis began washing the cups. "A beautiful animal like that."

*

It was the American Independence Day. A gap in the spells of wind and rain was seized upon in order to hold an impromptu barbecue party for Alexandra. The sun shone on the smoke rising above the outdoor grill, on which the hostess was personally supervising the calcification of *merguez, chipolatas* and something that had once resembled American hot dogs. In the air everywhere, swallows were twittering and skimming low.

Mme. Marius was lost in conversation with Luc. "It was Radish's brilliant question about the bank robbery that confirmed my first suspicions. They came to me when, at Ernest Ohrdre's funeral, I noticed so many license plates from the suburbs of Paris – from Le Blanc-Mesnil and thereabouts. And I began to wonder whether the men who carried out the bank robbery here so many years back weren't also from Le Blanc-Mesnil."

Mme. Radis came out of the house with a plate of what Americans call French fries. She had been busily and happily slicing the potatoes and checking the exact temperature of the oil: no smoke, but hot enough for a drop of water to explode on its surface. When she saw the sausages, her face fell.

"I confess, Luc, that one of my reasons for spending so much time in Paris recently was to check those suspicions against old newspapers and documents. It's been difficult: surprisingly little information was ever published, even in court transcriptions, and what I could find I found piecemeal. Just another bank robbery, just another murder.

"But I'm happy to say, as the Americans do, that it all checks out. I'm almost certain that Ernest Ohrdre, the man they called Ferrari, Camille Cointreau and – necessarily – Léon Toppe were the men who robbed and killed here some eighteen years ago."

Her nephew looked at her, half fascinated, half exasperated. "We've been thinking along similar lines, though you seem as usual to be some lengths ahead of me. Why in the world didn't you tell me what you were doing? You might have helped me in my investigations, as I might have helped you."

She looked away. "Because of the pride, I suppose, of an old woman. I didn't want to commit myself, to be associated with a foolish fantasy."

She turned to her nephew. "But you can help me now, Luc. Because I still have no proof – only an inner conviction, and the knowledge that the bank criminals all came from the 93rd *département.* It's well-nigh impossible to get a decent physical description of them, and there are almost no photographs. And there is of course another problem: there were five robbers. Where is the fifth man?"

Luc excused himself, produced his telephone and walked to the other end of the spongy garden. His aunt watched him, next to what was left of the yellow roses, the frail cosmos and the snapdragons trembling in sudden breeze. An orange rust of lichen burned on the stone wall. Luc was speaking on the phone with animation.

He walked back to the old lady and kissed her on the cheek. Her hair smelled good. "This is marvelous. You are marvelous. And you must forgive me if I leave my phone on – we need to know as fast as possible."

The storm broke with little warning; perhaps no one had been paying attention. The crash of thunder sent Edmund the Airedale and both cats into instant hiding. A strong wind struck and rain began to fall hard almost immediately. Once again, in this summer gone grim, people were running in every direction, carrying dishes, plates, bottles, glasses and napkins and silverware. Luc ran into the house with the more fragile chairs.

Only the old widow remained strangely immobile, looking up at the sky. Her clothes were getting wet through. "All my life," she said, with vibrant exhilaration – she had to raise her voice to be heard – "I have loved a storm more than anything else in nature."

The thunder crashed. Edmund was trembling beneath his mistress' bed. The lieutenant's telephone beeped pitifully in the stormy air.

*

Some time later, the lieutenant reported dutifully to his aunt. "I'm used," he said, "to your perspicacity, to your sense of things. But I'm impressed once again. Everything you suspected is true."

She showed signs of discomfort, even of exasperation, at this praise. She turned away and her voice grew sharp. "Well, Luc, that's all very well. Thank you. You said yourself you were thinking along the same lines. Now exactly what did you find out?"

"Nothing, in fact, that is yet conclusive, or could be used in court. But your hunch was right." The lightning lighted his face.

"The five men were collectively and individually found guilty, not only, of course, of the bank robbery here, but also of the murder of the bank clerk, a certain Victor Timm. A great deal of money was stolen – more than three million – and never recovered. Their refusal to indicate where the money was hidden lengthened their prison sentences, but they were all released, on parole and 'for good behavior,' just a few months ago."

"And the fifth man?"

"He died in prison."

*

The guests and the storm were gone. Aunt and nephew were drinking strong coffee; for a time there was no sound in the *salon.*

"This changes everything, of course. And it strengthens my conviction that poor Mlle. Plaine was mistaken for her lover." The lieutenant refilled both cups.

"Perhaps," said his aunt. "Perhaps you're right. But in any case her death was not unrelated to ABC and the bank robbers."

"It's related, as far as I can see, only to the accident of the 'friendship' between Léon and her. Surely they didn't know each other before the ABC people arrived here a few months ago."

He studied his cigar, and continued. "They're acting illegally, of course. I could arrest them all." He drew again on the long corona. "What am I saying? There's only one left. I could arrest *him.* But if I arrest Léon on a minor charge, we won't get to the bottom of all this. We'll just interrupt things. I'm tempted to wait and see."

His aunt watched smoke curl from her nephew's cigar. "If Léon Toppe is the murderer, then I don't suppose you have anything to lose. Surely he will have finished now: as far as we can guess, there's no one else left who knows where the

money is – not even Mlle. Plaine, assuming she knew. But it will be a death sentence for him if he's not the murderer, because if he isn't, then surely he's next on the list."

Luc drew long on his cool cigar, as if trying to find an answer in it. "Who else would have a motive? 'Who profits from the crime?' It is indeed a risk to wait. But we'll find out more – we'll find out everything – if we just sit tight for a bit."

She took up her cup and admired the hot, shiny black liquid in it. "Don't wait too long, Luc. Captain Ahsse is getting impatient with the body count."

*

"You don't look well, Aunt," said her nephew. He and Alexandra were picking rabbit bones out of the reheated charcoal sauce. The two younger people didn't look well either.

Indisposed by her own Fourth of July barbecue, Mme. Marius had been unable to sleep, but her *nuit blanche* had given her a chance to digest the facts, if not the food, of the previous evening. Ratiocination had filled the stormy night.

She smiled. "I didn't sleep last night, but I meditated, and I think we can move another step in the right direction." Suddenly she pushed the congealing dish away and did something unlike her: she left the table abruptly.

The others were silent on her return, as if the black rabbit impeded discourse. The old lady apologized for her disappearance. Pale as she was, she fixed her two guests with a lively eye.

"The money from the bank robbery was, as we all know, never recovered. I think it is here in Fleuré."

"Of course!" Alexandra and Luc spoke the same words at the same moment, but with different emphases – she with surprise, he with confirmation. He waited for her to finish.

"That's what the ABC people are doing with their instruments in people's cellars: they're looking for the cache!" Alexandra was flushed with the pleasure of discovery and understanding. The flush added to her beauty.

Luc turned to his hostess. "I'd been expecting your suspicions, Aunt, to confirm my own, which are similar. The lab has just this morning provided me with a number of documents on machines for the detection of metal and other materials."

The young man hesitated. "But there is something I don't understand yet. Why wouldn't they know where to look?"

"Because only the fifth man knew, and he died without telling them. Perhaps he was afraid they'd get to the money before he did, or perhaps he hoped to keep it all for himself. Perhaps he was afraid they'd just kill him if they found out – they couldn't, of course, as long as only he knew where the money was."

Luc refilled the three glasses with good côtes du rhone, hoping to wash the burnt taste away, but he did not speak, knowing that his aunt would continue.

"I'd be interested to know if any violence – some small, prudent violence, perhaps – was done to him. Could you find out for me, Luc?"

"Certainly." He paused. "We don't yet have facts or proof, of course, but the story is plausible – and it makes it still more probable that Léon Toppe is our killer. Somebody in what I suppose we should now call the ABC gang was eliminating the others, no doubt to take all the money himself. And the only one who's left is Léon."

Mme. Radis came to remove the almost-untouched plates. "If that poor Mlle. Plaine knew about all this, then maybe he killed her too." Mme. Radis was many pounds overweight. She was wearing a brightly-colored polyester summer sweater, one or two sizes too small.

The lieutenant continued. "And in that case, Léon is faking fear, through Mme. Vique. Now we know why he sent her to ask for protection, rather than coming himself. I don't think her fear was faked."

"That would explain," said Mme. Marius, "Léon's frequent apparent good cheer through all this – although he could of course be delighted to see the others disappear even if he hadn't killed them."

Mme. Radis brought the coffee in a silver pot which reflected the electric yellows of her clothes. The old widow poured.

"Still, he did jump at the noise I made."

Luc took out a cigar. "Some people are just naturally jumpy."

*

A mute white moth veered, apparently aimless in the air. Elisabeth Marius was belatedly thinning the apples from her favorite fruit tree. She didn't have much hope for fruit at the end of such a summer, but what hope there was depended on

eliminating most of the apples from each cluster. They were already bigger than green ping-pong balls.

Luc entered through the side gate. "Once again, Aunt, you were right. Remind me to stop playing chess with you." He held a file in his hand.

"The prison records show that the fifth man was roughed up on several occasions. The roughers-up were never conclusively identified – the man always refused to name his attackers – but it was generally thought they were his accomplices."

Alexandra arrived with coffee and smiled when she saw her cousin. She poured for her elders and put two cubes of sugar into her own cup: she had not yet mastered the French fashion.

"That of course doesn't prove," she said, "that they were trying to get a secret out of him. Maybe they just didn't like him."

Caught on a gust of air, the white moth sailed away.

*

In the damp, dark place, two little figures could have been seen, had there been light to see them by. The reader can therefore eliminate a hypothesis or two.

Chapter 10: The Sink of Drink, Depression and the Sea

A French fireman is magnificent. His American counterpoint is an admirable firefighter – some say the best, or the best-equipped, in the world – but he is utilitarian: however complete and up-to-date his equipment may be, he is quintessentially functional.

In France, however, and more generally in Europe, firemen, like princes, draw upon a reserve of mystic splendor. It is their helmets, like the crests of the warriors in the Iliad, that are the focus of this distinction: shining embossed steel and brass, like pewter and gold, like the relic of a glorious and half-forgotten battle.

The two-tone sirens of French emergency vehicles had ceased; the blue lights continued to revolve. Smoke was billowing from the windows of the long stone house and rising into the sky. The neighbors were in the streets. Sunlight gleamed on half a dozen steel and brass *casques*, bobbing and moving in half a dozen directions. This was not their first visit to the address in question.

Among them, moving like an insect on Achilles' shield, was a small, old, unhappy person. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry. I just forgot." She was speaking – it was hardly evident – of the *veau à la tomate* that she had been preparing especially for her niece.

An orange blob emerged from the smoke and became Mme. Radis, melodramatically throwing up her hands, coughing and cursing. It was hard to believe that such a nauseating odor could have taken its origin in a little veal, tomato and basil.

*

Héloïse sat in a corner of the damp garden staring, apparently, at a clump of yellow snapdragons. She did not move and she made no sound. A purple and green magpie clucked noisily and drove the other birds away. The sun once again slipped behind clouds, exasperating the girl's tubby brother Abélard, who needed it for his magnifying glass, to burn ants.

*

Dusk thickened into night and the house was still. Thidwick had never before seen her bedroom, *la chambre turquoise,* but the smell in the kitchen was still unbearable, and this seemed to be the alternative. He sat awkwardly on the edge of a chair that appeared too frail to support him. The rain pattered on the roof, on the dormer windows. Thidwick's face was red.

*

In the wet night, Léon Toppe approached his old car. He looked to the left and to the right, hesitated a moment, opened the trunk and took out a long object in a case. He looked around again, then carried it quickly to the cellar. For the next few minutes, an insomniac neighbor might have heard metallic noises: metal filing, metal on metal.

Léon emerged without the long object. In his hand was a small, bent metal plaque. He placed it in the trash can of a neighbor several doors down and went back into his own house. Apparently, no one saw him.

*

Unable to sleep, the widow Marius sat at her bedroom window and listened to the wind and the night rain. It was the sound in all nature she most loved. She thought of her husband, dead so long that she was free to remember him more warmly than she had lived with him. She thought of Mme. Radis, whose marriage – Mme Marius had not known M. Radis – had apparently not been happy. For a good part of the

night, Elisabeth Marius watched the moon emerge and vanish behind turbulent clouds, and thought about widows.

*

"Really, Aunt, you ought always to tell me everything: your suspicions, your hunches, your evidence."

The old lady was kneeling on her back stone steps, applying ether to a tick on Edmund the Airedale. "There's precious little left to tell."

The dog stood grave and still, submissive to his mistress' care. "I really should stop taking him out into the forest. It's illegal to let him run there, and the wild boars and the ferns are full of parasites."

The Airedale turned solemn eyes to her. "But he loves it so, and always comes when I call him back."

"It does no harm," the *gendarme* said, with professional expertise, "as long as you're not caught." He looked at the dog, then at the lady.

"I've asked Ahsse for a warrant to seize and inspect all the ABC materials." He was looking a little anxiously at his aunt, who did not speak.

"Surely there's no danger now of 'warning' Léon Toppe – he's had all the warning he could possibly desire." Luc paused.

"I've begun to think that the ABC search has been slowed because they can't be certain the bank notes are in a metal container – so metal detection won't suffice."

Still his aunt said nothing.

"But, whatever we find, I'm not sure our inquiry will advance appreciably. Even the strangest metal detectors, or whatever it is we find, are unlikely to serve as *pièces de conviction.* Unless of course we find something unexpected."

She put the ether away and took up a pair of tweezers. "There is, Luc, another bit of information you could help me with."

The lieutenant looked at his aunt in anticipation.

"The bank clerk who was killed in the robbery had a wife. See what you can find out about her."

*

Belle was helping Alexandra pour the tea: their hostess was poring over old magazines. Luc opened the never-locked front door without knocking and walked into the *salon* on his long legs. All three women smiled at him. Belle handed him his cup; Alexandra handed him a biscuit on a small porcelain dish.

"*Aliquando bonus dormitat Homerus.* Your very interesting question, Aunt, about the widow of the murdered bank clerk has come, alas, to nothing." Luc paused for a moment, to enjoy the suspense.

"It appears that, after a few years of drinking and depression over her husband's death, Mme. Victor Timm drowned in a boating accident off the coast of Normandy. Fourteen years ago."

There was a long moment of silence: the lieutenant had said what he had to say, Elisabeth Marius seemed nonplussed, and the other two ladies did not understand what Luc was talking about. The old lady took a long, slow sip of tea.

"I confess, Luc, that I am surprised – not, you know, because I was wrong – being right is often boring – but because this leaves me confused. Where there was, apparently, light, now there is dark. I don't know what to think."

The lieutenant smiled, a little indulgently. "I really don't see the difficulty. We'll probably arrest Léon Toppe this afternoon."

Mme. Marius looked alarmed. "Nonetheless, I wouldn't ... Luc, I wouldn't, perhaps, make an arrest just yet."

Luc studied his aunt. He forgot Léon Toppe. Instinctively, his thinking shifted.

"Unless," she said, "you're thinking of protective custody."

*

No one took up this comment. Elisabeth Marius turned to her tea and her nephew carried his to a window, which shuddered slightly in gusts of cold wind. A rare summer fire crackled in the fireplace. The two cats sat in front of it, inhuman satisfaction on their faces.

The lieutenant looked out onto the glistening garden and thought about his aunt. Apart from her cooking, the only faults of this exceptional woman were alcohol and pride, each of which he found easy to forgive. There was pride here, in her unexplained advice. But her pride had always been subordinate to passion for truth:

if a few people found her arrogant, they did so because she had not always, over the years, been able to ignore the fact that she was often better, and quicker, than others in finding out truth.

Conversation between Belle and Alexandra played like a melody in the background. Luc was not listening to it, nor were they speaking to him, and the old widow appeared once again lost in her own thought, a piece of embroidery absent-mindedly taken up and immobile in her hand. As he had begun to do regularly, he thought how much he was going to miss her.

His thinking moved at random: Léon Toppe, in danger of his life or not, was far out of mind. The lieutenant thought that perhaps a day would come when he would write his aunt's biography. It would be a difficult portrait. The lady had always been something of an enigma even to those who were close to her: she never insisted on her perceptions; she sometimes gave the sincere impression that she was the last person to discover what everyone else already knew, when in fact the opposite was true. But one day his aunt had said to him, "you're the person who understands me best."

He looked out the window at the dark weather. For the first time, he realized that he wanted to marry Alexandra.

*

"Could there be," asked the American, "other people involved in the ABC secret?"

Belle looked at her new friend. "Surely not. Why would anyone kill the others before the money is found? And it's obvious they haven't found it yet."

"Maybe," said Alexandra, "for fear of a sudden disappearance, once the money is found."

"Luc," said his aunt, after her long silence, "do please find out everything you possibly can about the life and death of Victor Timm's widow."

*

The Unknown Person sat in the cellar candlelight, arranging and rearranging two small puppet-like figures. The rain outside drummed on the cellar door.

Chapter 11: The Sea Throws Up

It was still grey daylight, but snails were everywhere in the dripping garden, a silent battalion of yellow-spiral and big brown snails, the latter good to eat, and good at

eating every leaf around. Elisabeth Marius rarely lost a chance to crush them underfoot.

"Apparently," said Luc, "M. Timm had just been transferred to Fleuré when the bank robbery occurred. He was some sort of high-level clerk who'd been promoted – to the wrong place at the wrong time.

"His widow went back to Dieppe, where she was born – her father had been an ivory merchant there. She was treated for depression, and then for alcoholism. She had a small boat she used to take out, and one stormy day she went out and never came back. The boat washed ashore after the storm, smashed on the shingles."

The old lady looked up sharply. "Do you mean to tell me, Luc Marius, that her body was never found?"

For perhaps the first time in private with his aunt, Luc Marius laughed his nervous laugh. It resembled an ordinary sheepish laugh.

"No, Aunt Elisabeth. Her body was never found."

*

The day grew ever more damp. Snailshells crunched under the old lady's feet.

"What more do you know about Mme. Timm? Does she have family?"

"A brother who says he hadn't seen her for years before her death – or whatever. Her parents died when she was hardly more than a child. Victor Timm was about all she had in the world.

"But she doesn't appear to have been without ambition. Before her marriage she studied for a year or two at the Sorbonne – medieval history, I think, and ..."

"Edward!" Elisabeth Marius cried out the name in a sort of triumph.

"My boy, Mme. Victor Timm is alive, and in Fleuré, or at least in the region. And she's become a dreadfully dangerous person."

*

The crystal and the porcelain made their fairy sounds. Belle Légère lit a cigarette. The lieutenant spoke.

"The problem is, of course, who would recognize Victor Timm's widow now? Surely no one in Fleuré. She's a woman with no face."

The discussion between Elisabeth and Luc Marius became the center of attention. Belle, Alexandra and Mme. Radis acted as fascinated auditors, silent and keen.

"She wasn't directly involved in the robbery or the trial, and in all my research I haven't been able to find a photograph of her – you'd better get one, Luc, as fast as you can. Radish, you know everything; what do you remember of Mme. Timm, all those years ago?"

The old Radish gruffly showed no pleasure at this recognition from her mistress, but she felt it.

"I think I remember somebody, short blond hair, young. I'm not sure. Of course the hair could be greying now, or dyed."

"If it's dyed," said Mme. Marius, "one can always tell." She stared at her housemaid's hair. It was a sort of eggplant purple.

She turned to her nephew. "Luc, you must put every woman's name in this village through your computers."

"I've already done that," said her nephew. "You should know, by the way, that Mme. Vane is being investigated by the *Fisc.* They've received an anonymous *lettre de dénonciation.*"

He turned to his cousin. "The *Fisc,* Alexandra, is the French IRS. It appears that there are irregularities in the accounts of Mme. Vane's various charities and associations."

Alexandra studied her cousin. "Dreadful woman, though not as bad as her husband. That doesn't make her a murderer."

"It doesn't," said Belle, "but surely it increases what you might call her suspectability."

"Do French officials," said Alexandra, "really take account of anonymous letters?"

Belle looked at her golden friend. "Doesn't everybody?"

*

The computer threw up its ghastly hue into the midnight. It spewed out names.

"Now it occurs to me, Aunt. That T you were looking up on your computer some time ago – it wasn't Toppe, was it? It was Timm."

The old lady smiled and said nothing.

*

Luc felt the investigation would advance more rapidly if Mme. Timm's name were announced to the public. In the ensuing, if brief, rush to discover the real Mme. Victor Timm nearly everyone suspected nearly everyone, briefly, tenaciously, casually or profoundly, sometimes with pleasure and sometimes without. All the village was, as the saying goes, abuzz.

Mesdames Marius and Radis were considered out of the running by everyone: each had been known and present in the village since before the bank robbery. So, someone humorously remarked, had Mlle. Cronique.

Mme. Vane, however, had not. Her age was right, and her husband – if, in fact, he was her husband – could have been acquired anywhere, anyhow and at any time. The fact that she was known to be under investigation by the *Fisc* considerably enhanced what Belle Légère called her "suspectability." The fact that no one liked her made her an even stronger candidate.

Belle Légère herself proved a surprisingly tempting speculation: she had arrived in Fleuré only a few years earlier, her probable age was compatible, and she was known, or thought, to have a rich and mysterious past. Even Elisabeth and Alexandra Marius could not help remembering that Belle, like Mme. Vane, was clearly hiding something. "But then," said the American, "who isn't?"

Elisabeth Marius, out of friendship and a desire to "clear" her, confronted Belle, who cheerfully admitted she had been lying regularly about her whereabouts.

"It turns out," Mme. Marius explained to her niece, "that Belle has been covering up her affair with the *vicomte.* We should have guessed. Truth to tell, I rather had."

But not everyone believed that Belle Légère had told all the truth there was to tell.

Rightly or wrongly, Mlle. Plaine was kept off the list of candidates because she was dead.

Mme. Vique made a good suspect, though in fact no one knew much either for or against her; in the circumstances, being unknown was suspicious.

Even Alexandra entered the lists: initially omitted because she was too young, someone had observed that she could be the daughter of the deadly widow. Her candidacy was retained, although without much conviction, because she had arrived

unexpectedly from nowhere, and because not even Mme. Marius knew much about her family.

Elisabeth Marius and her nephew were distressed that they could not rationally eliminate their beloved American from the collection of suspects. The old widow spent another sleepless, fruitful night over this. In the morning, before Alexandra came down to breakfast, she said to Luc, with a serene smile, "I know it cannot be Alexandra: I have looked her in the eye, and taken tea with her."

Mme. Eclaire was too old. The *vicomtesse* had been known in the region since her birth.

There were of course many other women whose names have not figured, or have not yet figured, in this chronicle. There was even some conjecture that Mme. Timm was masquerading as a man.

Although this period of speculation and suspicion was short, and the doubts were often unspoken, many relationships were grievously harmed: there were times when it seemed that the evil in the murderer's soul was spreading contagiously throughout the village. Given the French gift for *brouilles,* family feuds and general passionate *sympathie* and *antipathie,* healing would come only with the years, or generations.

In the middle of this stew of rumors, the research carried out by the *gendarmerie* into public as well as secret records and archives yielded a fact that gave everyone pause: Léon Toppe had been accused many years earlier, before the bank robbery, of what amounted to the elimination of his rivals. Charges had been brought, there was an indictment, but the accuser had subsequently desisted. As is usual in such cases in France, the affair had ended in a *non-lieu,* and the presiding judge had ordered all records destroyed – which in this case meant keeping them from the public eye, and available to the eyes of the *gendarmes.*

Those eyes therefore began to look less for widows, and turned once again toward the surviving member of the ABC company.

*

After knocking in vain on the front door of the tenement apartment, Lieutenant Marius directed Thidwick to try the door of the ABC garage. The metal door shuddered under Thidwick's knuckles. Luc presented his warrant and explained, as he had many times before, that the search was routine. He put on his best good-natured and naive demeanor, and succeeded in arousing very little apparent resistance or alarm, at least at first, and as far as Léon Toppe was concerned.

The lieutenant was surprised to see Mme. Vique; she seemed even more surprised, and as ill at ease as Léon appeared the opposite, although his hearty bluff never fully convinced. Léon began, almost enthusiastically, to show and explain his equipment.

Luc examined several devices for the detection and measurement of humidity. They were dirty and worn, but it was of course impossible to know how much they had really been used, and when. There was nothing Luc was capable of recognizing as a sonic or metal detector, which in any case would have been not only legal but perhaps normal in the type of work in question.

Mme. Vique occupied the lieutenant's attention as much as the incomprehensible instruments: she looked scared. Luc examined a long, somewhat battered instrument with no identifying marks. He observed it carefully and ostentatiously, discreetly watching Mme. Vique at the same time. She looked away, licked her lips, mumbled something about a frying pan to Léon, and asked if she could be excused. Léon reddened and explained that she wanted to begin cooking their lunch. The lieutenant told Thidwick to let her leave. Thidwick opened the garage door for her. His hand was so big it completely covered the door handle.

As he had anticipated, Luc could make little sense of these arcane instruments. He thought of sending them all to the laboratory of the *gendarmerie,* but this would have involved a complete disruption of whatever work Léon was doing, and Luc felt he had small probable cause. If nothing even indirectly incriminating was found, Léon would have good reason for complaint, as Captain Ahsse would for rejoicing. In the end, the lieutenant took away only the one long, unmarked instrument. Léon did not protest.

*

The Mysterious Person adjusted the positions of the candles. The two small puppet figures caught the flamelight. Photographs were everywhere on the damp walls. Water seeped mutely in, and stood in pools.

Chapter 12: Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Most of the annual, ritual noise that celebrates France's massacre of her citizens and traditions occurs not on July 14th, but on the evening of the 13th: it is then the boys in the streets set off their *pétards* and fill the French night with explosions.

Luc appeared skeptical. "The firecrackers were, he says, why he didn't react immediately to the shot. And I must say he looked scared. He was white, and trembling – none of his usual blustery ways."

The lieutenant adjusted his collar, wondering vaguely why it had become so tight. "The shot that was supposed to have his number on it could have been fired at any time tonight – and by anyone, including of course by Léon himself. No one would have distinguished it from the firecrackers. Convenient for Léon. It lines up almost next to the shot that killed Miss Plaine – not a meter away."

The electric light fell on Elisabeth Marius's *sel-et-poivre* hair. She put down her embroidery.

"I believe Léon, Luc. He's a bad man – he seems to be a criminal several times over – but in this case I don't think he's our man." Luc studied his aunt in the lamplight.

The old woman continued. "And what about our famous, cool marksman, or marksperson? The one who fires quickly right to the target? To say nothing of the possibility that Mlle. Plaine was in fact a first mistake, and that this therefore would be the second failed attempt to kill Léon."

She paused, and then resumed. "That struck me right away. It isn't even consistent with what happened to poor Miss Plaine, where the shot was at least fired with precision. I wonder if the murderer is losing her nerve, or his nerve – scared of being caught at last, or hesitating to kill yet again."

"Maybe," said the lieutenant, "but we mustn't forget that the one or two errors we think we're detecting concern shootings. The previous murders did not."

Luc Marius was one of the sharpshooters of the *gendarmerie.* "Shooting is more affected by hesitation than most methods of killing: if you flinch, you miss. Timing is all. With poison, and even to some extent with a car – or with the 'fixing' of someone's brakes – it's possible to hesitate before proceeding to the act. Murder will nevertheless be done."

Elisabeth Marius looked out at the falling rain, filtering dim light. "Perhaps," she said, "the killer is reluctant to murder this particular person."

*

Luc studied a cigar that gave him no satisfaction, and understood that the problem was not therein. He turned to his aunt, as a discouraged younger person will to an older one. "Ahsse is gloating. The last time I spoke to him he said to me, 'A girl scout could have done as well as you have.'"

His aunt watched Luc let his cigar go out. He was not himself. She tossed her *sel-et-poivre* head in contempt. "How silly! And how sexist!"

*

Elisabeth and Luc Marius were frustrated, even exasperated, to find themselves almost back where they had started – each holding a more or less opposing, and no doubt mutually exclusive, point of view. Although the lieutenant had applied for warrants to search several houses fancied to shelter an incognito Mme. Timm, he continued to suspect that Léon was, in one way or another, involved in the four deaths. His aunt remained convinced of the presence of a Black Widow.

"Ask," he said, "*à qui profite le crime*."

"Revenge," she replied, "is a dish best served cold."

Amidst these broodings, Lucky Luke watched his aunt pour his cup of pale gold breakfast tea, which was not cold. He felt, somewhere in his speculations, renascent enthusiasm, and a tinge of guilt.

In spite of the crude justice to be found in the murder of murderers, neither she nor he rejoiced at killing. Nonetheless, looking into his aunt's bright eyes, their blue unwashed by her age, he could see that she was enjoying the conundrum, the challenge, as much as he – and that working out the truth about the ABC murders, now that they had separated their points of view, had become another chess game between them. Murder was not just a game; it was a crime, and it was heinous. But it could be a game as well.

*

In the widow Marius's house and at several other sites, the wall inspections went on. Léon Toppe, now assisted by Mme. Vique, worked long hours.

Suspicious as he was of Léon, Luc nonetheless ordered protection for him.

*

Elisabeth Marius had been so preoccupied with her newspapers and magazines that she had forgotten to prepare lunch. Rather than wait for Mme. Radis to return from her shopping, Luc was preparing himself a second sandwich in the kitchen. Although his mouth was full yet again, he managed to converse with his aunt, who remained in her study.

"Whether or not our murderer is Mme. Vique's friend or boyfriend or boss or whatever Léon thinks he is, I'd better provide protection for her too – she did ask, and we can't very well outright warn her of him at this stage."

The lieutenant put more imported cheddar cheese, rare roast beef and mustard into his fat English sandwich. "I wonder if she knows he's a bank robber."

His aunt's voice, small but clear, came through the sound of rustling papers. "Oh, she knows." There was a pause. "I think she knows."

"Well, I'm still worried about her. God knows there've been enough deaths already. Perhaps I should warn her after all."

The old lady came out of her *bibliothèque* and walked into the kitchen. There was something new, or conclusive, in her face. "Perhaps we should warn Léon instead."

She took the sandwich from her nephew's hand and put it down on the table. "I think it's time – urgently time – to go to see them. I'd suggest we begin with Léon Toppe, and that we hurry."

*

They were not in time. When Léon Toppe did not answer the knocking at his door, Luc looked through the half-curtained window and saw his body. He ordered Thidwick, who had been standing guard, to break open the door. Not only strong but also experienced in such breakings, Thidwick did so with one sharp, booted kick at the lock. Mme. Marius had the impression he could simply have smashed the door down with his fist.

Léon Toppe lay on his ratty sofa in a grotesque imitation of comfort. A slender metal cylinder, attached to an unrecognizable instrument, had been driven into his heart. As with Camille's death, there was no other sign of violence. Police protection had done no good because Léon and his killer were both snugly inside his apartment.

The lieutenant and Thidwick called in the standard team of technicians and laboratory people. They went outside in the rain to meet the ambulance. They inspected the grounds around the apartment.

Thidwick took his job utterly to heart: this was the second time someone under his protection had been murdered. But in the pouring rain it was easy for both him and his superior to pretend that he had no tears in his eyes. An hour earlier, he had seen Mme. Vique walk calmly away.

Luke re-entered the house to use his cell-phone; he ordered all available *gendarmes* in the region to find and arrest Mme. Vique. He himself would go to the woman's house.

His aunt, near enough to hear his part of the conversation, waited for her nephew to finish. "I think," she said, "there is perhaps no hurry now."

*

The lieutenant, postponing the fussing over and recording of all the details of what was done and could not be undone, explained carefully to the ambulance people what should not be touched, which was almost everything. He supervised the departure of the corpse. Then he, his aunt and Thidwick left immediately for Mme. Vique's house.

"I'm sure," his aunt said, "we shall find Mme. Victor Timm at home." Luc too had almost unconsciously accepted that Mme. Vique had become Mme. Timm.

They came to a sad little brick-and-concrete structure without age, without character, and with no flowers in the tiny garden. A broken plastic trash can and a clothesline took their place. As the three persons got out of the car and walked to the unlighted front door, buffets of wind and rain struck so hard that the old lady had difficulty keeping her balance. She took her nephew's arm.

There was no answer to their knock: they stood in silence, knocked again and listened to the wind and rain. Brown paint was peeling from the door.

"I have no warrant," said Luc, "so, Thidwick, I'm afraid I can't let you smash our way in this time. *Gendarmes,* however, have more than one trick up their sleeves." He produced, not from his sleeve but from his assistant's battered leather bag, a large ring of strange keys, and a sort of jack-knife of many peculiar thin blades.

They pulled their raincoats up around their necks in the howling rain – umbrellas would have been sucked inside out and blown away. From time to time the shuddering wind was punctuated by the metallic sound of Lucky Luke's manipulations. The door opened.

Even with the lamps turned on, the few rooms in this nondescript house were ill-lit. The smell of mold faintly permeated everywhere. The rooms were exceptional in their sinister abandon.

Mme. Marius looked at the worn imitation-leather sofa. The plastic was cracked and part of the stuffing was coming out. The table in front of it was still covered with grease and a few crumbs from a forgotten meal. A fly rose from it and disappeared.

For a moment no one spoke: Thidwick, because habitually he waited in silence for his orders, the lieutenant and his aunt because they were shocked by the place they had entered.

"Depressed people," said the old lady at last, "sometimes create an outside like what's inside them. Perhaps Victor Timm's widow needed a place like this."

While Luc and Thidwick quickly searched the silent rooms, his aunt took a book from the bookcase: several shelves of Latin, medieval history and a few popular novels.

Luc and Thidwick returned. "There's no one here," said Luc, "and we haven't yet found anything suspicious."

His aunt seemed to be gazing at Luc without seeing him. "Saint Louis, the cathedrals, the poems of Martial and Catullus .... What do they have to do with this grim little house? Perhaps they were Mme. Timm's old hope for a way out. And both the books and her husband failed to be a way out."

She smiled at the book. "You know, I've seen her university records. She was a good student."

The lieutenant made a gesture of impatience. *"Ma tante,"* he said, "let's go. We have to find this woman immediately."

At last Mme. Marius's eyes focused on her nephew. She smiled again, sadly. "Oh, we'll find her, Luc. I'm quite sure she's right here, somewhere nearby."

They searched the garage. Among the damp cardboard boxes and broken bottles was a red car. The grill was damaged. Lucky Luke examined it, then turned to his aunt.

"We should have thought of it," he said. "This car has been painted red – very crudely. It used to be grey. Mme. Vique – or, I should say, Mme Timm – must have had it painted, or more likely painted it herself, then driven it the night of Ernest Ohrdre's murder, immediately driven it back here and left it unused thereafter. And no one thought of her grey car. It would appear that our medieval widow is nobody's fool."

"I never," said Mme. Marius, "would have thought of such a trick."

"Most people suspect others only of what they are capable of doing themselves."

The door of the garage slammed furiously open in the storm wind. Luc had to raise his voice to be heard. "A woman that clever may still be difficult to catch."

His aunt shouted back in the wind. "I think not, Luc. Her work is finished. I imagine she's right here."

She squinted against the rain. "There is no attic. The only place we haven't checked is the cellar."

The outside door to the cellar was of the type called flat, or "hatch." It was locked from the inside.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "Luc, this is one of those exceptional circumstances in which Thidwick might be given permission to proceed without a search warrant." With no apparent effort, the big man bent over, seized both doors in his hands and pulled them simultaneously off their hinges.

Even before the three descended the dark steps, the flickering was visible. A number of thick wax cylinders were still giving off light to moldy photographs and unrecognizable newspaper clippings on the walls. Shallow pools of stagnant water collected in patches on the packed earth floor. Mme. Victor Timm's body lay in one of them.

Elisabeth Marius spoke with a sharp sadness. *"Mon Dieu!* Move her out of the water, Thidwick!" She had never before given an order to the huge man, nor would she ever again. He obeyed instantly, standing dumbly with the body like a puppet in his arms.

Luc examined the corpse. It was already cool. The lieutenant folded the woman's arms rigidly across her chest but, knowing it was too late, did not try to close her eyes.

Lying on their sides on the floor were five doll-like figures made of cloth and bits of wood. Mme. Marius watched her nephew as he studied them.

One was a man in a stained white coat. His wooden-stick back was broken. One was a man in a pink jacket. That puppet looked as if it had been crushed underfoot. Another had little golden curls, and a stick in its bottom. A fourth man appeared to have a needle in his heart. Only one puppet resembled a woman. It was not transformed, and could be thought dead only because it lay on its side. Luc took it in his hands.

He looked at his aunt. "Mlle. Plaine."

She shook her head. "No, not Mlle. Plaine. That poor woman didn't count, in any sense of the word. Look – there's no pinhole in the head, nothing to suggest death

by shooting. No, Luc, I imagine Mme. Timm was truly sorry at Mlle. Plaine's death."

Elisabeth Marius looked at the clumsy little figure. "This is Mme. Timm's own puppet – the figure of someone who died, no doubt, of invisible poison. From the beginning, she sentenced herself to death as well."

Thidwick shifted under the weight of the cadaver he was holding. A sheet of paper crinkled underfoot. Luc picked it up. It was still fresh and relatively dry, unlike the other papers in the cellar. He held it to the candlelight.

Que Dieu me pardonne. Justice est faite.

Elisabeth Marius, Luc Marius and Thidwick, still carrying the body, climbed the stairs to the ratty little backyard. The rain had stopped, but the eaves dripped, and dripped, and dripped.

Chapter 13: Sweetness and Light in the Village of Fleuré

The sun shone and the gardens were no longer spongy. Apparently immobile, a buzzard turned slowly above them.

The end-of-summer party on Mme. Marius's grounds was another of her rituals: the great white tent had been ordered months in advance. The annual garden party did not have the exclusive character of the *dîner du solstice:* the entire village was not of course invited, but one might have thought half of it was. The grounds were big: even so large a number of guests seemed swallowed up in greenery and flowers, returning after weeks of rain.

The air was filled with the smell of Radish's good food, with chatter, laughter and light. Tables were set up, some in the warm sun, some in the shade of the trees or in the pure white tent. *Petits fours salés* and *sucrés* were served at each table by shy, smiling local girls and boys, glad to earn a little money and be included in a village rite at the same time. Champagne would have been too expensive for so large a group, but there was good red corbières, good chilled white muscadet-sur-lie, punch, and fruit juice for the meek in spirit. The buzzard sailed slowly out of sight over the wooded valley slope.

M. Eclaire wandered from table to table, inspecting the pastries, moving them out of the sun, tasting meditatively from time to time. There were crumbs in his moustache. Although he had insisted on personally providing the *petits fours sucrés,* his hostess had even less occasion than inclination to attend to him, taken as she was with the general direction of the afternoon and tiny conversations with so many people.

Mme. Eclaire followed her husband wherever he went, and looked at him more often than at anyone else. She appeared to find happiness in the simple fact of his existence.

Alexandra and Luc were standing side by side at a little distance from the older couple. Each had the same unspoken lover's thought: Mme. Eclaire cared for her husband as joyfully as he cared for pastry. It occurred to Luc that Mme. Eclaire was even luckier than her husband.

Elisabeth Marius passed by as she hastened to meet newcomers. "Perhaps we shall order this same tent for your wedding," she said.

Belle Légère stood, alone for a moment, by a mass of deep red roses returning to health. Bathed in the sun, she did not seek to be beautiful, but she knew she was. In her hand was a special, opaque glass that her friend Elisabeth had provided her surreptitiously. It contained champagne.

Although she was aware of his presence, she did not approach Charles d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune. All things come, she thought, to those who wait.

Mlle. Cronique had arrived early, walking stiffly and slowly with her two canes, and been shown immediately to a comfortable seat. *M. le Maire* soon sat down beside her, relieving the others of the necessity of keeping her company. The two old people were not talking of the old days, but of the neighbors they saw around them: their comments were meant to be discreet, but they spoke in such loud voices that they could be heard through half the grounds.

M. and Mme. Vane had been called away unexpectedly and were unable to attend.

Mme. Radis, happy among dishes and bowls, found time to take a small glass of punch to Thidwick. The big man blushed at this attention. Out of uniform, he was wearing checked black-and-brown trousers and a new floral summer shirt, and looked very proud.

M. and Mme. Goudi stayed fondly at each other's sides, smiling brightly at nothing at all, listening to *M. le Curé* talk about the same thing. The Goudis saw divine and superstitious coincidence everywhere. *M. le Curé* found no fault with this.

Valentin had not been invited, and had not expected to be. He was walking outside the village, through the Roman ruins on the edge of the forest, there where there was no alcohol. Broken pieces of frieze and column lay at his feet. Nearby were fields whose wheat had just been harvested. Crows waddled and tiny rodents scurried in

the stubble. Buzzards glided overhead, seeking prey. Valentin saw all this, and understood all this.

M. Jousse arrived with more platters of *rillettes de canard* and *pâté de campagne.* M. Brioche arrived at the same time with politely ordered loaves of several kinds: *aux noix, complet,* even *aux raisins,* for the roquefort. Mme. Radis inspected everything closely, hoping improbably that M. Brioche would not notice the quantities of dark, heavy *pain Poilâne,* imported from Paris for those who preferred good bread. She gave each man a glass of punch.

Le vicomte d'Aoune d'Oubilles d'Aoune put down his glass of muscadet, excused himself and walked across the garden to the red roses.

The asymmetrical twins crossed the lawn. Fat Abélard had decided they were to watch another stupid old film, which had at least the advantage of being in English. Upon this announcement, Héloïse had simply stood up silently, ready to follow. For the first time in his life, the boy was looking forward to school. Frail and pale, Héloïse thought she was going to miss the old lady. It was a sentiment that would greatly have surprised the old lady.

Even *le capitaine* Ahsse was present, glass in hand, explaining to *M. le Curé* and to M. and Mme. Goudi that, when he set his mind to solving a crime, he usually succeeded very promptly indeed. He and Lucky Luke had spent together as little time as convention permitted.

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"The autopsy and lab reports have arrived. Mme. Timm poisoned herself, of course. Léon was drugged before he was killed, just as Camille was. The metal object driven into his heart was the probe of a low-frequency ultrasonic detector – which confirms why the ABC people were taking so long to find their *cache:* that sort of detector can reveal a hole, but not what's in it. They had to investigate every hollow space they found."

He paused. "Mme. Timm must herself have used that metal probe dozens of times before she drove it into her lover's heart." The shadows in the garden were lengthening. Almost all the guests had left.

Luc was walking among the old, gnarled locust trees, next to Alexandra, talking with his aunt. "The instruments were mostly metal detectors, plus the ill-fated *détecteur à ultrasons. C'est bizarre.* It was only later that I remembered hearing Mme. Vique – before she became Mme. Timm – speak to Léon about a frying pan. 'Frying pan' is a slang term for a metal detector. I should have ticked on that immediately."

He paused to light a precious Punch Punch, which for him was a solemn gesture. "Now that our boys have taken over the search, I suppose they'll find the money in somebody's wall, metal box or no metal box."

Elisabeth Marius smiled. "I imagine a great many of our neighbors are looking already."

Alexandra plucked a small white dahlia from its broken stem and handed it to her aunt. "I wonder," she said, "how Mme. Timm made contact with the men who had murdered her husband."

The smoke rose from Luc's cigar, mottled in warm shadow and evening sun. "In a very clever manner," he said. "She introduced herself to Léon as a *correspondante de prison* while he was still serving his sentence. It seems they wrote to each other for years. She even visited him. So it was natural they would continue to see each other once he got out. Needless to say, he didn't know who she was."

Elisabeth Marius rotated the white flower absently in her hand. "Mme. Timm was as unusual as she was unlucky. She believed that the ABC people had ruined her life, so she meticulously executed an extraordinary series of symbolic murders, too well thought-out for any of us to comprehend and stop in time. To further her plan, she even became the lover of the man she hated most in the world, and then made sure he understood his death was imminent. Léon Toppe must have spent his last days filled with terror, in spite of the façade he maintained."

The old lady looked at the flower her niece had given her. "If only because I cannot imagine taking a lover without any sentiment at all except hatred, I ask myself ... I can't shake the suspicion that, an instant before she fired, Mme. Timm recognized poor Mlle. Plaine, coming out of her own lover's apartment. And that therefore, in some strange form, she might have loved Léon, even a very little ... and so was jealous."

Alexandra and Luc continued to walk alongside their aunt, but they did not speak.

"Perhaps not," she continued. "Perhaps that's just what I would have felt, or want to believe about someone who had, after all, loved once, if not twice."

She paused, and seemed moved. "And I can't help wondering whether, when Léon was 'just missed,' whether she didn't, for similar reasons ... just as you once said, Luc ... whether she didn't flinch ... because she loved him, if only a little. Even if she also felt he had to die."

She smiled at the young couple. Her thoughts became less disconnected. "That of course would also explain why, after three – or four – quick murders, running to plan, the last one was so slow."

She watched Luc's cigar smoke disappear in the late light. "No doubt I'm completely mistaken. And of course, we'll never know."

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The summer sun sank, filling the West and even, by pale reflection, the sparse clouds in the East with the color of a boiled lobster. The Marius three were seated on a stone bench, enjoying the evening cool. Mme. Radis could be heard far off in the kitchen, the chatter and clatter suggesting her usual flurry of work, returning a confusion of dirty dishes to their habitual, immaculate order. Occasional crashes suggested that she had requisitioned Thidwick for kitchen duty.

"It is a terrible thing," said Elisabeth Marius, "to see someone leave love and learn hate." She got up, produced a tiny pair of pruning shears from her pocket, and began to look for enough renascent roses for a small bouquet in Alexandra's bedroom.

"Those men all died because of their crime. They didn't realize that when they robbed our bank they killed not one person, but two. And they didn't realize that they had sealed their own fate as well."

"*Justice est faite*," said Luc. "Remarkable as she was, Mme. Victor Timm had, I fear, an imperfect idea of justice."

Alexandra passed her aunt the basket she had been carrying. "I think," she said, "that the Widow Timm meant 'justice is done' to apply to herself as well: an eye for an eye. She was a student of classic literature, of Greek and Roman tragedy. And if that is indeed what she meant, then her own immolation closed the cycle, like the fifth act in the old plays I used to hate to read in school: evil burns out, and the living learn, and wonder, and go on."

Elisabeth Marius clipped and gathered her roses.

* *fin* *

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