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# JEAN GIONO

# TO THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

By the author of *The Man Who Planted Trees*

'FEW BOOKS ABOUT THE FIRST WORLD WAR HAVE ACHIEVED A SHARPER INTENSITY'
– *SUNDAY TELEGRAPH*

By the same author

Angelo

The Battle of Pavia (1525)

The Man Who Planted Trees

Two Riders of the Storm

JEAN GIONO

# TO THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Translated from the French by Norman Glass

PETER OWEN

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Translated from the French *Le grand troupeau*

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*Contents*

1 WAR SPELLS RUIN FOR YOUR RAMS, YOUR EWE-RAMS AND YOUR CROPS 7
2 THE SHEPHERDS HALT 21
3 THE RAVEN 31
4 JULIA REMEMBERS 36
5 THE CHARITY OF THE WORLD 40
6 THE BLUEBOTTLE 47
7 THE SALT OF THE EARTH 52
8 REGOTAZ 66
9 THERE WILL BE NO PITY 75
10 WAITING 109
11 VERDUN 124
12 NEWS FROM JOSEPH 129
13 THE CAPTAIN 133
14 FIRE IN THE BLOOD 138
15 SANTERRE 147
16 THE TIN BOX 172
17 NEWS FROM CASIMIR 177
18 JOSEPH'S LEFT HAND 184
19 TO THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE 187
20 THE SHEPHERD'S BLESSING 207

## *War Spells Ruin for Your Rams, Your Ewe-Lambs and Your Crops*

The night before they had watched as all the men left. It was a thick August night smelling of corn and horse-sweat. The animals were harnessed in the station-yard. The big plough-haulers had been tied up to the shafts on the carts; their solid rumps held back the loads of women and children.

The train moved off quietly in the night, spattering the willow trees with embers as it took on speed. Then all the horses started moaning together.

That same morning, as usual, Rose appeared on the doorstep of her butcher's shop to sweep the gutter. The shoemaker was already there, hands in the pockets of his overalls, looking round, sniffing the air. Now and then he tilted his head as if to chase a fly away.

'Rose,' he said, 'have you heard about it?'

'Heard about what?' Rose stood still, broom in the air.

The shoemaker's workshop and the butcher's shop were next door to each other on the same side of the street. The shoemaker took a short, dancing step to the side, all that was needed to bring him right up to Rose. 'Did you see Boromé?' he said.

'Which one?'

'What do you mean which one? Not the boy of course.

You know very well he left with the others. The old one, my colleague.'

'No.'

'He's just been round to see me. He pushed open the door and went "Oh!" I said, "Oh, Boromé." He said, "Have you made that coffee?" So he had coffee with me. Now it turns out that near Hougues Hill . . . Boromé hasn't been able to sleep since his son left and he spent the whole night walking in the hills . . . it turns out that near Hougues Hill he saw a freshly split boulder level with the earth. "It's like a new one," he told me. "The earth on this boulder has been laid bare. I wouldn't say deliberately, but it's been trodden over time and again. By animals, like a big herd, with hard feet. And when the earth was worn away this boulder appeared." That's what he told me. And carved into this boulder you can see a triangle with points and then a circle with an arrow stuck on.'

Rose didn't move her feet, but she drew in her bosom and looked down at the shoemaker with the eyes of a startled chicken. 'I'm frightened,' she said.

The steeple clock struck eight, but there was no change in the day; the sun came down as it did every morning over the sloping roof of Alic's house. Further down the street, on the opposite side, the owner of the grocer's shop knocked over a chair and some tins of food. That meant she was in a hurry, fat as she was. As soon as she was on the street she called out as if she were drowning: 'Rose! Father John! Don't you smell it?'

They pumped the air up into their noses two or three times before answering. 'What?'

'Smell!' she exclaimed, then she crossed the street. 'Your noses must be blocked! I was upstairs to see how much sugar was left. The moment I opened the window this smell jumped at my face like a cat. My cheeks got so burned I'm still red all over.'

'Now I smell it,' said the shoemaker.

'Me too,' said Rose, and she drew in her bosom again and looked down at the shoemaker and the grocer.

A smell of wool, of sweat, of upturned soil filled the sky.

'What on earth can it be?'

'That's what I'd like to know,' the shoemaker said.

The three of them suddenly looked up at the sky. A shadow had all but blotted out the day; above the roof-tops a carpet of dust brushed across the sun. And then they heard the noise of a stream of rushing water broken loose from its source, accompanied by chimes which rang out in all the corners of the earth and sky. The sound of bells and of water moved forward and packets of dust passed by in the clouds gradually turning muscat-red, like the juice of grapes. And at last the sky was crumpled by moaning and lamentation, like the moaning of the horses the night before.

Chewing tufts of his white beard and spitting out the hairs, Father John looked at Rose and the grocer. 'I'm going to see what's up,' he said.

'Wait for us, we're coming too.'

Rose put her broom aside, the grocer buttoned up his smock, and the three of them set off down the street. And old Malan ran after them, in his shirt-sleeves, one cheek covered with shaving-soap and the other clean. And as he ran, he looked up into the air, turning his head from side to side; he might have been dodging a storm cloud.

The mountain road passes in front of the market town where it makes a handsome curve round a fountain, then it moves away towards the plains where at this time of the year you can see the heat trembling.

The older members of the Workers' Guild were already gathered at this bend: the tobacconist with her blood-red eyes, the women, and the children holding on to the women's skirts. Burle was ill, but he opened wide his window, stuck out his head and stayed there sniffing the air. He was in his night-shirt, with a grey paper poultice on his chest.

Judging from the noise, the thing, whatever it was, came from the mountainside and had even reached the Saint-Lazare district of the town. The houses were smoky with dust, as though the plaster was crumbling.

'That's all we need is what I say,' the shoemaker said. 'This happening when the vine's rotten. A stain on the leaf like a dirty finger and the whole thing dries up.'

They heard the bells now, big and little ones, and the sound of feet on the ground, and the bleating and cries of lambs coming from the height of the bulge in the mountain road.

'Burle, what do you think it is?' Malan called out.

'Sheep,' said Burle. He spoke hoarsely; the pain in his chest made him grind his teeth. 'Sheep, but I've never heard such a noise in all my life . . . .'

Buzzing in the elm trees, the flies sounded like hail. With a few stray pigeons among them, a rush of swallows swerved round in the sky and went sizzling by like oil in a frying-pan.

'Rot,' said the shoemaker. 'There are islands of dead fish on the Durance. If you pick 'em up, they slip through your fingers, rotten and full of scales.'

The dairymaid, Babeau, who was just in front of him, waiting like everybody else, took a step to one side. 'It's in the air,' she said. 'And yesterday evening, did you see it?'

'Yes! And you?'

'Me too. When I got back from the station, I stayed on my doorstep to get some fresh air. My skin was burning from it all. That's when I saw it, all along the way, a big thing, lit up, it looked like a duck's foot.'

'It looked like a big artemisia leaf all in gold,' said the shoemaker.

But the whole sky was shaking now and everyone fell silent. Then they saw an old man appear with the first sheep of a large flock behind him.

'Holy Virgin!' said the dairymaid.

'The fellow's crazy!' Burle shouted.

There was the big deathly sun and the dust and the dense heat over those tough roads that man or beast could hardly make an impression on.

'The war,' the shoemaker said, 'the war's bringing 'em down.'

This time everybody around him kept silent. Even Burle up there at his window understood, and the others understood without being told. Their muffled heart-beats came faster. They remembered the night before that smelled of too much corn. Yes, too much corn. And what disgust they had felt to smell that corn, and to see the children in the women's arms, and to see the young girls still brimming with pleasure . . . . To be aware of all that and at the same time to watch those handsome young men going away to the moaning of the horses.

The man was alone in front of the sheep. He was alone, old, and exhausted. You only had to see his

dragging feet and the heavy weight of the staff in his hand. But he had a will and his head must have been full of plans. From head to toe he was white with dust like the sheep. All white. He pushed back his hat and rubbed his eyes with his fists. Dripping with sweat, the two large red holes of his eyes emerged from that whiteness. He took a long deliberate look at everybody. Without a word, without a whistle, without even a gesture, he turned the bend in the road. They watched him looking ahead to the end of the straight road and they saw how his eyes took in everything. He pushed his hat back over his face and moved on, dragging his feet.

There was no pack-mule to carry the saddle behind him, nor any donkeys laden with wicker baskets. But there was an animal just behind the man and a few steps ahead of the sheep, a large, completely black animal with blood under its belly. It turned the bend in the road.

Clerestin had put on his glasses. He wrinkled his nose and looked. 'It's the ram!' he shouted. 'It's the master-sheep, it's the ram! Around him, they nodded in agreement. They watched the ram losing its blood in streams in the dust and they sensed the man's invincible will as he pushed his way forward along the misery of the road. Clerestin took off his hat and scratched his head. Burle leaned out of his window, his gaze fixed on the bleeding ram. He had been head shepherd in his time. He leaned further out and his poultice came unstuck from the hairs on his chest. 'It's a waste of life,' he said, 'it's a waste of life.' Eventually he got his poultice back in place, drew back and closed the window, giving the catch a sharp blow.

The old shepherd was already far ahead on the plain. The herd followed slowly behind him. They were more or less the same size, squeezed together flank to flank in waves. Big mountain bees, dead or alive, were entangled in their wool. Flowers and thorns and bright green grass were twined round their legs. A huge rat stumbled across the backs of the sheep. A she-ass left the column and stood still. She spread her legs apart. Her young one moved forward, swinging his large head. He groped towards the tit and, neck stretched out, started sucking greedily. His tail trembled. The ass looked at the men with her beautiful eyes, mossy as forest stones. She cried out now and then because the babe sucked too quickly.

The animals were in good shape and could still move without limping. The ones in front, with bigs heads and lifeless eyes, could still recall the sights and smells of the mountain. Ahead of them was the smell of the master ram, the smell of love and frantic ewes. They moved forward, memories of the mountains floating in their lolling heads. They remembered how they used to chew the herbs and how the night wind nested in their woolly ears. They remembered the lambs lying down like milk in the fresh grass and how the rains . . .!

The running herd sounded like water. As they ran they took up the whole road and on each side they rubbed against the houses and the garden walls. The baby ass stopped sucking and tottered drunkenly on his feet. A thread of milk dripped from his muzzle. His mother licked his eyes, then she turned round and went away, the young one following behind her.

Another ram came into sight. Its two large whirling horns broadened out like oak tree branches; they lay across the backs of the sheep on either side. The ram's

head floated on the wave of the animals like an oak log on the stormy Durance. Its teeth and chops were clotted with blood. The bend in the road pushed the ram to the side. With no support for its head now, the ram was pulled towards the ground. It struggled with its forelegs, then knelt down, its head resting on the earth like a dead thing. The ram struggled with its hind legs, but finally collapsed in the dust like a heap of shorn wool. With little, painful jerks, it spread open its thighs to show a mire of blood where flies and bees buzzed around. Two red eggs were held to the belly by a single nerve no thicker than a piece of string.

Burle had returned to his window, but didn't open it. They saw his lips move. 'It's a waste of life. Such a waste of life!'

And Clerestin began talking aloud to himself in an effort to free himself of the pain he had felt since the departure of his sons. 'What are we going to do, that's what I'd like to know,' he said. 'We're no race of warriors, that's for sure. My young'un pale and sick, my eldest with his tender feet! And he's got some mysterious illness inside which nobody can put their finger on. Where's the justice in it?' He had kept his hat on and everybody could see his weeping eyes, green and mossy like the eyes of the she-ass which had gone away with the herd.

Now and then they heard the boom of a big bell or the clear tinkle of little bells coming from a donkey, a mule, or even an old horse. The animals had lost their dancing pace, they plodded along now with broken feet, grass and soil in their pelts and slabs of mud on their thighs. Every now and then the shepherd, who was far away on the distant plains, lost his way and they all had to stop. The halt would go up the line of the herd, then they set off again, and at the first step all the animals bleated in pain. The sound of bells grew fainter at the far end of the road, but the monotonous rumbling of the wave continued, and the noise of pain.

'Listen!' somebody said.

They listened. Far above, in the depths of the sky, the steeple clock stuffed with dust was trying to strike midday.

Pouting like a little girl and sniffing every now and then, Rose's mother set the plates haphazardly on the table. The young boy climbed into his chair.

'Move over here,' the woman said. She had already tried to hide the empty place with the water jug and a bottle. 'Move over . . . no, don't bother . . . leave the place empty . . . no, move over . . . . Oh, do as you want!' She went to the sink to get the glasses, and stayed there for a long moment without moving, her face turned towards the wall.

'Come and eat, Mother,' Rose said.

But the mother shook her head. 'Who knows where they are now?'

Outside the big herd was running.

'They can't be very far,' Rose said. 'They have to get their uniform and all their things, and rifles and cartridges. Then they have to practise shooting. Who's to know which of them can use a gun?'

'He's only got to say he doesn't know.'

'It's not so easy,' Rose said. 'They've got it all written down at the town hall, about bringing your shooting permit and all the rest. It's better he says nothing, or replies like the others. And then they can't throw in all

the fathers of families just like that. First of all they'll put in the ones who aren't married, next those who don't have any children, then those who don't have a business. As for us, well, he's married, he's got a child, and we've got a business, so . . . . You know between now and then . . . . The chemist says it'll be for All Saints' Day, at the latest, the latest, mind you . . . . If you ask me, it'll turn out one way or the other before then . . . . Come and eat, Mother.'

'No, there's a lump in my throat. I don't care how it turns out, I just want it to end.'

Doubled up in grief, Clerestin had stayed near the herd. 'What am I going to do at home? I'm alone now.' He called to the owner of the baker's shop. 'Amelia, get me a chunk of bread and put it on the bill.'

But he didn't dare eat it; he just stood there holding the bread. The sheep were still passing, but slowly. The animals were ill now. The sight of this big herd was too much for Clerestin, the pain and so much life worn away on the road. There was blood under all their bellies. An animal would sneeze, jerk its head and totter. Would it stand or fall? It set off again, walking stiffly.

The ram was still there on the ground, legs spread out, loosing streams of blood. Soaked in blood, uncurled and heavy, its wool hung like froth. The ram didn't complain. It breathed with all its might and the breath hollowed out two small furrows in the dust.

Another shepherd was there now. Standing at the bend in the road, he watched the sheep pass by. A little while ago he had had to kick his way through the flock which threatened to carry him along. He had wiped his face which shone with sweat. Huddled over his staff he might have been a saint, looking out ahead, beyond.

Burle's bed was close to the window. They could see him up there, putting on his corduroy trousers, arranging his poultice, and buttoning his shirt over it. A moment went by, then the door opened and Burle came out. His feet were bare. He held one hand over his chest and carried a chair in the other. He went up to the shepherd and touched him on the shoulder 'Look here. old fellow,' he said, 'you can't stay standing up all the time. Take the chair.'

The other was still lost in thought, but he sat down, put his staff between his legs, crossed his hands over the crook and cushioned his chin on them. He lowered his gaze from the sun.

'Judging from the size of it,' the shoemaker said when he returned, 'judging from the sheer mass of it, we're hardly at the middle of this herd. Just think a bit. It's been moving along since eight o'clock this morning. Now, with that one sleeping on his chair and the other down there, the first one, that makes a total of two men for all these beasts! Remember, we haven't seen a dog, hardly any donkeys, and now tell me if it isn't a sign the times are cursed.' And Clerestin also looked beyond the animals, looked at what the big herd had written in blood and pain, there, in front of him along the white road.

'I went to the edge of the trees,' the shoemaker continued. 'You can see the Asse valley. That's where they're coming from. The whole mountain's smoking as though it's on fire. Listen! Can you hear the thunder?'

Over by the mountain there was a sound of hammers in the sky as a storm erupted.

The ewes which passed by now had just emerged from

the rain, and were still heavy with the weight of water. They took short steps, shaking their heads first to dig out a place in front of them. A man walked through the middle of them, dripping with water and carrying a lamb sheltered under his jacket.

'Antoine! Antoine!' he called out to the shepherd on the chair. The shepherd didn't even raise his head. He remained hidden under his big hat and simply made a sign with his right hand to say go on, go on.

The ram had just died. It jerked up its heavy branched head, once, as though obeying an order. It looked up at the sky from between the branches of its horns, a long, endless look. Neck stretched out, it moaned like a lamb. Then it spread open its thighs, extended its legs and with the noise of a bursting balloon let loose a bundle of guts and black blood.

'Mother,' Rose said, as she lit the lamp, 'you'd better sleep with me tonight. Alone, you'd . . . .'

She didn't have to say any more. Her big wet lips rested a moment longer on 'alone'. So the mother took the son's place beside the wife. The mattress bore the son's imprint. The mother stretched out in the space the length of her son. And side by side, without saying a word, the two women listened to the unending noise of the herd in the night. Was the mountain planning to wither up the living beasts? To their surprise there came a moment of silence and the women breathed a grey sorrowful sleep. Then the mother woke up with a start. 'Listen,' she said.

'What's the matter?' Rose said.

'Somebody's in pain.'

They no longer heard the noise of sheep, but a child's moaning, a call to the mother which touched both women to the heart. They jumped out of bed.

'Light the candle.'

'Maybe it's the young'un, Mother, with his tummy troubles.'

'No, Rose, it came from the street.'

'At this hour?'

They listened. Yes, it was a call for mother. The two women clattered down the stairs in their bare feet.

'Wait!' The bolt was tough. Rose bruised her plump hands, her breasts jumped in her night-shirt. 'I've done it! Don't let the candle out.'

There was a smell of sheep in the night.

'Is it raining, Mother?'

'No, that's the dust from the herd falling back on the ground.'

Suddenly they saw what was making the noise, a small white stain on the stone slabs. Rose knelt down. A small lamb, dirty and trembling, with a heavy head. Rose took it into her bare arms. The lamb pushed its damp muzzle into the hollow of her elbow.

'He's still a suckling,' the mother said.

The lamb folded up in Rose's elbow. She shivered from its cold breath. 'I think you can rear them on milk from a baby's bottle,' she said.

The lamb grew quiet. It nestled close to the warmth of Rose's body, closed its eyes, then opened them again to see if the arms were still there. Reassured, it shook with happiness. The lamb groped towards Rose's breasts. She laughed

'They're dry,' she said. 'Oh, if I still had milk, I'd give you plenty, but there's none left. Mother, we must remember to get some more tomorrow.'

'Come on,' the mother said, 'time to go in, we're both here in our night-shirts.'

'All right,' Rose said, 'but go and open the door in the corridor. We can't bring the lamb in through the shop. It's full of meat and smells of blood.'

## *The Shepherds Halt*

At Valensole the clock struck eleven muffled chimes. The night wind dusted the threshing-floors and the chaff rose up in clouds towards the moon.

In the Chaurane farm, far below the plateau, you could hear the pulley in the granary. The cord had been left in the grooves of the wheel. Old Jerome listened to the song of the pulley and thought about the cord. 'Those women!' he said.

Then he turned round on his left side and listened to his heart beating in his ear, loud as an ironworks. He thought about Diana, the dog, which hadn't come home this evening. Just like I said. I told 'em to keep their eyes open. That bitch would surely run off for a mate or go out hunting alone! He lifted his head from the cushion and listened. He made out a sound of bells in the hills.

'When Joseph left, he said, "Look after this dog for me." It's only the second night and they've let her loose.' He turned over on his right side. He couldn't sleep, but he no longer heard his heart. He hardly heard the whistle of the wind breaking on the corner of the barn or the noise of the almond trees on the plain.

Jerome was now the only man on the Chaurane farm. His daughter Madeleine, just eighteen, and his daughter-in-law, Julia, hardly older, were the only ones left since

Joseph's departure. Who'll fix the plough handle, who'll sharpen the scythe and go out reaping? Jerome stretched out there on the bed, stiff as a log. His hands closed around emptiness, as though holding on to the handles of the swing-plough. Eyes shut, he seemed to see his acres of land turning over, see them capsize around him with their load of almond trees and corn, the way they did when he'd been driving his two teams of horses for too long.

Suddenly he threw back the sheet, got up, fumbled in his trouser pocket and lit a match. He went into the corridor, holding the match with his fingertips, and tapped on his daughter-in-law's door. 'Julia! Julia!' He knocked gently with the flat of his hand.

'Yes.'

The bed creaked, then he heard the soft noise of bare feet on the stone slabs. Jerome kept his hand on the door handle. 'No,' he said, 'don't open, I'm in my night-shirt. I wanted to ask you if you'd fed the horses.' The match went out.

'Oh, no,' Julia said.

'Are you going to?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I'll go. I'll soon get used to it.'

On her way back from the stable, Julia went to Madeleine's room and whispered at the crack in the door.

'Maledeine, are you asleep?'

'No.'

'Listen, Madeleine. I've just been feeding the horses. If you knew what it's like down there in the valley. Lanterns darting about and such a noise of sheep . . . and down there, on the banks of the Durance, they've lit a fire . . . .'

'I know,' said Madeleine, 'I saw them come. It's a whole herd. There's so many, it's frightening. I saw them come in the evening. They slept on the Gardettes's land.'

Julia thought for a moment in the darkness of the corridor. She didn't move. 'Listen, Madeleine, can I come in? I want to tell you something.'

'Come in,' Madeleine said. 'Do you want the light on?'

'No, it doesn't matter. I'll lie down near to you. My feet are cold from these stones. Listen, Madeleine, you're not angry with me?'

'I don't bear anybody a grudge,' Madeleine said between clenched teeth.

Julia stroked her warily. 'Madeleine, it's true. I swear it's true, I never said anything, not a word. Believe me. Just think how long we've been sweethearts. Remember how we exchanged ribbons under the apple tree? I'd be only too happy to see you married, as happy as you were when I told you I was marrying your brother. And remember how we stayed in the haystack kissing each other? Madeleine, are you listening? It wasn't me. He's the one who watched you, he's the one who saw. The night before he left, he said to me in bed, "Keep an eye on her while I'm away. I saw her again with Gardette's Oliver. They were hugging each other tight. Keep an eye on her or I'll twist the necks off both of you." '

'It's not true,' Madeleine said, 'we weren't doing anything wrong.'

'I know how things are, Madeleine, I know. There's nothing wrong in it. It's in the blood. But I'll tell you something, you're Joseph's sister, but he's as jealous of you as if you were his wife. He doesn't have a hard

heart. He's jealous, that's all. But don't be frightened, he won't kill you. He said that in a panic when he was getting ready to leave. He'd been drinking a lot to get over it, having to leave everything behind and . . . .'

'And if he kills me,' Madeleine said in the darkness, 'there's nothing we can do about it.'

At the Gardette farm, on the other side of the valley, the lamp was still alight in the fig tree branches. Delphine had obviously lost her sense of economy in these evil times. Her father too, that vigorous old man with strong white teeth. The table had been cleared, but they were still gathered around it under the lamp. They sat in silence, Delphine, her father, and young Oliver. The shepherd who had led the herd was with them. He had emerged from the shadows, out of the night, a little while ago, white with dust like a cicada. The night was so laden with stars they could see the texture of the sky.

'Forty hours,' the shepherd said, 'a single forty-hour shift.'

'Too much,' the father said.

'You can only blame fate,' the shepherd said.

'Whoever you blame,' the father said, 'it's still too much suffering for the animals.' They lit their pipes.

'It happened the first day,' the shepherd said, gazing out into the night. 'We were in the high pastures and things looked splendid all around us. The white flowers on the plants made them look like newly-weds. You could see the grass shining bright for miles. And suddenly I saw them on the flat of the mountain below me, two men in blue walking right through the hay, right through the thickest part. They didn't give a damn. Those two, I said to myself, they're bluecoats from the the police station at Saint Andrew's. Alphonse must have been up to his larks again with the woman on the foot-bridge. And sure enough they were going towards his place. Then they call to him without moving nearer and there's our Alphonse coming out to them. After that they go down the valley and climb up towards Bousquet's place. That's too much, I tell myself, he's no lecher, after all. From there they go on towards Danton's, next to Arsène's, and then they take the bend in the mountain towards the pastures on the other slope. Their footprints left a winding trail all through our grass. Alphonse had put his animals in the pen. He went towards the cedar tree. I saw him down there, standing up with his head thrown back like he was drinking from a bottle. He blew the horn. The sound reached me on my lands. And then I heard Bousquet blow, and Danton, and Arsène, and on the other slope too all the horns were sounding. So without thinking about it I started blowing too with all my force. And despite the beauty of the day and the laughter of the meadows, I blew as if a dog had died. In the afternoon I saw the men grouped together under the fir tree, the one we call 34. What's got into you, I said to myself, climbing up here today? But one of the men below . . . I found out later it was Arles's Julius . . . he steps out of the shade so I could see him clearly. He plants his feet squarely on the ground and blows up to me that three note signal which means come at once! The packs were ready under the tree. "We're off," my friends told me. "The grass is lovely here," I said. "Yes," they replied, "but we're leaving for the war." '

The shepherd sucked his pipe to let his heart rest, to soften the memory of that moment when the earth started trembling. '. . . Three of us stayed behind,' he went on, 'Pertuis's Antoine, Julius—the one I told you about, and me. Three of us, too old to make good soldiers. "Too old also," Antoine said, "to control the herd left in our hands." And in the evening the youngsters hoisted their sacks on their shouders and set off, leaving us alone. There were so many sheep on the mountain we couldn't see the grass. We got together to plan things out. Our hearts were heavy with the news. We stayed up right through the night, smoking all the tobacco we had and making plans. When we all agreed, we set off with me in front. You should have heard the racket ahead of us. The old men and women lined up along the road to watch us passing through their villages. When we reached the plain, a woman who'd walked more than three miles with a lamb in her arms came up to me. "Old fellow," she said, "this is the end of my journey. I can't take another step. I found this lamb in your flock. It'll die if I leave it on the ground . . . Hey! Stop!" I said: "No." Then I said: "Put it down." After a moment I turned round. The lamb was stretched out on the slope and the woman was running like a hare through the ploughed fields. I called out after her, but she was too far away, she didn't hear. I had a clear picture then of all the grief in store for us. And I thought about it, boss, I thought about it so much it burned me. When I was dried up like a cinder, I said, "To the world and its charity!"' And in the darkness he stretched out his open hand, large as a plane tree leaf.

They heard a man's voice and a dog barking in the depths of the valley.

'It's me he's looking for,' the shepherd said. He called out his name and: 'Up here!'

'Where?'

'Climb up to the lamp!' the shepherd shouted.

It took a moment for the man to reach the lamp's halo and when he was near they saw that he was small and old. Soil and grass were sticking to him like tar. He must have been sleeping anywhere he could to get his breath back. A dog followed him.

'Hello, Julius,' the shepherd said.

'Ah,' the other sighed and collapsed on to a bench.

The father winked at Delphine. She went into the house and returned with some bread, a bottle of wine and a glass.

'The soup's cold,' the father said, 'so we'll warm it up for you, my friend. Let's start with what we've got here.'

Julius drank down a glass with one gulp; he might have been at a fountain.

'You'll have some more?'

'Sure I will, and if you don't mind . . .'

He took out his horn-handled knife, cut off a chunk of bread thick as his arm, dipped it in the wine and gave it to his dog. The father smoked with long, hurried puffs.

'Tobacco?'

Julius took out his pipe, but abruptly put it on the table, and placed his hand on the shepherd's shoulder. 'I came to see you, Thomas, I came to see you. It's killing me. It's madness. We can't go on. We've got to slow down. Think of the animals. You've got the healthy ones in front and the clear road, but we're in the thick of the misery. It's murder, I'm telling you. We won't bring one back alive. We're asking too much of

them. They weren't made for this. Oh, Thomas, we need shade and fresh air, we need rest and the life we used to lead.'

The crickets sang. Nothing stirred. The night was at peace and crammed with stars.

'You shouldn't think of the life we led before,' Thomas said. 'We've hit the hard times. You think I'm in clover? You think I don't see them watching us when we pass through their villages? I huddle up under my hat.'

He kept quiet. At first they only heard the crickets, but then, from the depths of the night, came the muffled bleating of the sheep in the plain. Julius sighed deeply. 'It's the sign to set off,' he said. 'I'd like to know if they've got it in them.'

'It's automatic now,' Thomas said. 'If one gets up, the others get up. If one sets off, the others follow behind.'

They could see the whole line of the herd in the early morning light: in the valley, on the hills, and down on the banks of the Durance where the blue thread of the watch-fire rose up. Standing on the hillside slope, the three men looked around. Julius went to take up his position. The father's gaze travelled across the wave of the herd. Thomas looked straight ahead at the heart of it.

'So long,' Julius said.

'So long,' Thomas said.

The father and Thomas went down into the valley. The big master ram was stretched out on its side under a green oak. The thyme and flowers were soaked in its blood. Its horns were entangled in the grass and it cried out in pain. Its tongue hung out on the soil, dry as a stone and covered with flies and bees. Thomas knocked the insects away with his hat, then he felt the ram's back and tested the resilience of its legs. He gently touched the wound between the thighs. The ram made no objections, it looked the man fully in the eyes.

'I'm going to ask you something, boss,' Thomas said. 'Save my ram. He could get up now as he is and manage a hundred yards, a thousand, who knows how many? He's got pluck. But in the end he'll fall and stay down to die. Save him, it's still possible. Take him up to your farm, look after him. And when these evil days are over and if I'm still alive I'll come to fetch him.'

'You can count on me,' the father said, 'and I thank you, 'shepherd, it's done me good to see what pity you've got.'

Thomas drew his hat down over his eyes. 'As I told you,' he said, 'in the end we depend on the charity of the world.'

'I'll go and fetch my wheelbarrow,' the father said. 'It'll be easier for carrying him.' When he got back, the shepherd spread some hay and an old sack over the bottom of the barrow, then they lifted in the ram.

'Boil some agrimony,' Thomas said, 'then wipe the inside of his thighs with it. Next you make a paste of sulphur and fresh oil for the bleeding parts. Use it twice a day, but I know my ram, he needs affection as much as treatment. He'll soon be well if he stays with you.' He patted the animal's forehead and scratched it. The ram looked at him, then, shaking its chops it bellowed out the ram's love-call.

'Don't be frightened,' the shepherd said. 'I'm leaving you with a good man. If I'm going away, my beauty, it's because fate's pulling me by the shirt-tails. Behave yourself with this man, don't be choosy about the grass,

don't make havoc in the cattle-shed. If you have any ewes, don't go wild, eat your salt quietly. You belong to his home now. Obey the women and make yourself respected.' Stretching out his arm, he sought the father's hand. 'I'm paying you with thanks,' he said, 'but if I owe you anything . . . .'

'You don't . . . . You just owe it to yourself to get back safely home. And if your master doesn't take his hat off to you when you cross the threshold, you can tell him from me that he's a louse.' He turned round and started pushing the wheelbarrow slowly up the slope.

## *The Raven*

'The raven!' the man shouted.

Joseph jumped up from the grass, gun in hand. 'It's too far away,' he said. 'I can't fire.'

The raven flew off on its lingering wings. They listened to its flight, then the earth was heavy with silence except at the edge of the field where a pile of dung sizzled.

'If I had a hunting-gun,' Joseph said, 'I'd hit it with one bullet, but not with this thing.'

'I'm frightened,' the man said softly, stretched out in the grass. Joseph leaned down beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

'I'll look after you, old fellow, I'm here,' he said gently.

Comforted, the man mumbled something as he looked into Joseph's friendly eyes. Joseph put his gun aside, knelt down and then stretched out in the grass. The earth was weighty with silence.

'Have you taken off your coat?' the man asked.

Joseph said nothing.

'Have you taken off your coat?' the man shouted.

'What?' said Joseph, scrambling up on all fours and groping for his gun. 'What! Are they here? I was sleeping . . . .'

'No, they aren't here. I only asked if you'd taken off your coat.'

'My eyes are dropping out with tiredness,' Joseph said. 'I was talking to you, watching you, then suddenly . . . .'

'Have you taken off your coat?' the man repeated.

'Yes, I left it in the Gamin wood at Creville the day before yesterday. When they opened fire on us. Near the bridge. You were lying near the pole. The coat got caught in my legs. I threw it away when I was running. Now, will you let me sleep, old fellow?'

'Take my coat off too,' the man said. 'I wish there was a bit of wind. And the blanket.'

'Leave the blanket alone,' Joseph said. 'You need to be covered. Is it bothering you?'

'It's hot and heavy. It feels like mud on top of me. If I could only get down to the water.'

'Keep calm,' Joseph said. 'If you'd only try and sleep.'

'I don't want to sleep,' the man said. 'Give me your hand.' The man took out his hand from under the blanket and edged it towards Joseph's. 'There,' he said, 'I need to feel you close, let's stay like this.'

Below them where it sloped round a corner and above, where it turned into the wood, the road was deserted.

'How long is it since the others left?' the man asked.

'About five hours.'

'When did the lieutenant say they'd come and fetch us?'

'In the evening.'

'Do you think they'll find us?'

'As long as we don't move from here.'

'Tell me . . . that wound in my thigh, is it serious?'

'No,' Joseph said.

'What did the major say?' the man asked.

'It wasn't the major, it was the boy. The major had already ridden off. There was the boy, an artillery man, and me. I said, "It's Jules," then I asked, "What's wrong with him?" "He got hit in the thigh," they told me. "I know him," I said. The artillery man only had a couple of bandages, so we used those and then we opened a sack and took out a brand-new shirt. We made a proper job of it. But when we tried to carry you, you woke up and screamed. Just then the whole company passed by and I called out to the lieutenant. "There's no more room in the van," he said. "Keep him there and stay with him. The van'll come back for you." Then the artillery soldier said, "I've got a pal too who's in bad shape. We'll carry him to the edge of the road. You can look after two easy as one and put them both in the van." '

'Where's the other guy?' Jules asked.

'Over there. You can't see him because you're lying down.'

'Is he asleep?'

'Yes,' Joseph said, 'but it wasn't easy for him. He got a bullet in the middle of his chest.'

'Come nearer,' Jules said.

Joseph moved towards him.

'Listen,' Jules said, 'if we get out of this alive, will you come home with me? You're from the South, it isn't far. You take your usual train and get off at Dijon. My mother will be glad to see you. We live in a little square near the market. The old lady takes in ironing and she's got three girls working for her. We'll have some larks with them. You'll sleep on a couch downstairs. If you want a regular life, we can fix things up for you. There's a junk-room on the second floor we could clear up. I work at the printer's, but I get off at five. I'll tell them,

"Joseph's here today," so we'll go down to Adolphe's. Nobody cooks snails like Adolphe . . . .'

'Yes, old fellow,' Joseph said, 'yes.'

A white vapour rose up in the trees, making them look as though they were on fire. Above the mist the sun shone. A thick grey heat stifled everything.

The wounded artillery man opened his mouth for a moment, then he closed it and the blood trickled down his chin. He opened and closed his mouth two or three times; the effort he exerted brought a little colour to the white edge of his half-closed eyes. He struggled to speak through the blood. 'Water!' he called out clearly.

'Let me go,' Joseph said to Jules. 'You hear? He needs a drink.' Joseph put his arm under the artillery man's head, lifted him up gently and held the full drinking-flask close to his lips. The blood-choked mouth shook, bit the flask and spilled the water. Finally the man started gulping down steadily. 'Thanks,' he said. A red spittle foamed between his lips.

Joseph shook the empty flask. He looked at Jules. 'I'm going to get some more water. You hear? Don't move, old fellow. I'll be back in a jiffy. Don't shout!'

'The raven! The raven!'

'Don't get frightened by a bird! And don't shout for the other guy's sake. He's resting now despite the pain he's in. If the van comes while I'm away, make them wait.'

There were three buildings grouped silently at the bottom of the hillside: a grange, a farm, and a cattle-shed. There was a disembowelled mattress on the road. The grange was empty except for a pool of horse piss and an old leather strap. Joseph entered quietly, took a long look into the shadowy corners, picked up the strap and rolled it up round its buckle. He could tell from the smell there'd been three horses in that shed. Inside the farm a door torn off its hinges was standing near the fireplace. It was half-burned and the handle had fallen into the ashes. Joseph trod on something soft that felt like a dead dog. It was a corduroy jacket rolled into a bundle. Somebody must have used it for a pillow. He heard running water near the grange. There was a trough dug out in a tree trunk. Except in the dry places near the meadow, human footprints had stamped out the marks made by the cattle. Joseph plunged his bare arms into the trough. It was almost evening, the darkness was filtering through the grey day. He filled the flask and sat down on the ground, swinging the flask between his knees. The smell reminded him of the Chauranes farm and his corn that he'd stacked in sheafs on the threshing-floor.

Julia . . . she's a plucky one, he thought, the girl too . . . as long as that Oliver keeps his distance . . . The noise of running water filled his head. He thought of the soldiers and the lines of cannons and the carts covered with tarpaulin which puffed up in the wind. He thought of the soldiers grouped in squadrons on the road like a flock of sheep. He thought of the dead littered all over the slope and hacked to pieces. It's impossible! He kept on swinging the flask by the end of the strap until it slipped from his fingers, then he curled up to sleep like a beast in the grass.

'It'll be a fine clear night,' Julia said. 'You can tell from the air, and you can see Saint Victor's.'

The alpine wind had swept the twilight free of clouds and the edges of the sky stood out sharp as a scythe. Where the sun set, the hump of Lure with its smoking collieries rose up in celestial green lovely as meadow dew.

'Where are you going?' the father asked.

'To feed the animals.'

As usual on windy days, night descended abruptly, complete with bright stars in the broad milky way.

Julia groped her way along the shed wall for the door. I wonder if it'll be like the last time, she thought. And that was all she needed to excite her. She lifted the wooden latch. Yes, it was just like the last time and it would always be the same. Every time she'd come to this door she'd be greeted by the smell of fresh hay, that smell that made her heart beat like water brimming over the edge of a fountain. That smell of hay and horses. A smell of solid life which scraped her skin like a stone. The last time, she remembered, she'd dropped the pitchfork, and when she bent down to pick it up the smell rose up so strongly she got gooseflesh. Her body wanted to burst into flowers. She felt she was being carried away by the leaves and the wind. No use in fighting against it. She remembered her marriage night, everybody tipsy with wine, and the new linen against her skin, and the corset which squeezed her in the right places, and then Joseph kissing her with his mouth wide open as though he was biting into a slice of melon . . . .

Julia climbed the ladder and got piles of hay ready. The smell made her giddy. The stack was like a huge flower opening at every thrust. She watched the fork-fulls steaming in the lantern-light.

She returned to the kitchen, shaking her legs at the door to let the hay dust drop from under her dress. Madeleine was knitting, or making a skirt perhaps. It was hard to tell which, because she was sitting almost completely in the shadow. Jerome was sleeping, his mouth closed tight. The clock was ticking. Not a cheerful sight! Sometimes you need to . . . . Ah! it was hard to be away from men. Julia sniffed her hands heavy with the smell of horses.

'Hello, Madeleine,' she said

Up in her room Julia lit the candle and moved it away in case the heat cracked the glass face of the clock. Just underneath the clock there was the remains of a photograph of her and Joseph at their wedding. Those white gloves were so uncomfortable! Joseph had orange blossom in his button-hole. Oh, the monster!

Julia undid her corset and pulled up the lace of her slip. She bent down to take off her her shoes. Her breasts were heavy. The shoelace was caught in a knot. She'd better sit down. Her cold bare arms rubbed against her naked breasts which felt so much warmer.

She peeled off her stockings as though skinning a rabbit. She had to take them off inside out because the sweat had stuck them to her foot. She hung them over

the back of the chair to dry. She looked at her bare feet, enjoying the sensation of wiggling her toes. The hay dust got into everything. Stockings, the corners of shoes, and made everything sticky. She wiped her feet and rubbed a swollen vein on the foot which hurt when she moved her big toe. She stood up and went to the small square mirror to arrange her hair.

Walking across the stone slabs with her bare feet, she felt she was stepping through a dew-drenched meadow. The smell of horses still clung to her hands. She let down her black hair, heavy as wet wool. She didn't bother to use a comb, she twisted her hair with her hands. Whatever she did, she felt her breasts. If she bent down, she was conscious of their weight, if she lifted up her arms, they pulled at her flesh like string. Joseph always had that living smell, like a horse's smell, that smell of work and strength which filled your nose when he undressed. A smell of leather and sweaty hair, like the smell of those big summer salads when you crush garlic and mix it with vinegar and mustard powder in the salad bowl.

She took off her skirt and petticoat at the same time and stepped out of the pile of clothes. She gave her hips a brisk rubbing. This hay gets all over you, she thought. She might have been covered with fleas. She hurried to be completely naked in order to feel the tart night round her skin. She'd walk arm in arm with the cold wind, looking up at the stars, she'd feel her body and brains cleaned and freshened by the alpine wind. She took off her blouse, then blew out the candle and went to the window. She rubbed her breasts all over with a duster, she might have been cleaning little melons. And it's true, with the veins and the nipple hard as the end of a stalk, they really were like little melons crackling between her fingers.

The wind flew high in the night like an immense bird. At the end of August there was always a smell of corn in the sheafs, corn abandoned by men, and the smell of roasting on the threshing-floors. The wind dropped and the night grew hot. Her whole body breathed and tingled and she could hear her blood beating in the night which pressed upon her. She had two creases in her hips going down to her belly, her flat, smooth belly. The clock ticked on. Her breasts were still now, like solid hillside stones. Joseph used to say, 'They're winter turnips. Show me your winter turnips. Give me your winter turnips!' Joseph! Her heart was sour with longing for that old smell of man and work. Julia went to uncover the bed, so used to Joseph that his place was carved out in it. There might be a phantom lying under the white sheet. She drew back the sheet to shake away the imprint, but it refused to move. She put on her clean night-shirt and stretched out in Joseph's place. Just before she fell asleep, Julia sniffed the horse smell on her fingers, then she stuck her hand between her thighs.

His legs were already crushed by the wheel, but the horse reared on its tight harness and fell upon him, its hooves crushing his stomach . . . .

Joseph woke up shouting. He heard the thick night trembling with a cry. 'Is it night? What happened? Did they leave me alone here?' He felt for his water-flask in the grass. He could still hear the cry coming from the orchard.

'Jules! I'm coming! I fell asleep.' He ran through the thick grass and groped round the apple tree.

'You bugger,' Jules said through his teeth. 'You filthy bugger. You went off like that, you wanted to get rid of me. Son of a whore, I know what you're worth now!'

Joseph's shaking hand searched the grass. He touched the body, it was taut and twisted, and he listened to the breath boiling with anger and fear.

'Don't be crazy, Jules. Listen, I'm here. I've got some water for you. You hear, water? For you and the other guy . . . .'

'You bugger,' Jules said quietly, 'you bugger.'

'How could you have dragged yourself across the ground with that thigh of yours? It's impossible! You must have been out of your mind. Don't you trust me any more, old fellow?'

'I'm in awful pain.'

'What do you expect? You must have been on your grass bed when I fell asleep, then you pulled yourself over here. Jules, old fellow, I need a little help, I'm also alone.'

They might have been pushing against a wall as they moved towards each other in the torrid night. The grass bed wasn't far away, the blanket was rolled up.

'Come on,' Joseph said, 'come on, relax in my arms. It's not easy for me either.'

'I'm in awful pain.'

'Don't talk any more. I'd made your leg comfortable, now I'll have to do it again in the darkness.' Joseph rubbed his hands together so they'd feel less rough, then he put one hand under Jules's neck and the other on to the hot seeping part around the wound. Exerting all his strength, he moved him gently, slowly towards the grass bed. Jules snorted with pain. Joseph felt so choked with pity he wanted to throw it up, to vomit out that pity and leave it on the roadside. Anything to get rid of it and go away, anything to rid himself of what he had to bear. He was left with a scrap of strength no bigger than a drop of water. That was all he had to confront the pain of others.

'Quietly now, old fellow. It'll soon be over. You'll go to sleep again. Don't cry. I wish I could lift the pain out of you with my hands.'

The night was hard as cement. The only sounds were moans on the surface of the earth.

'Stay there,' Jules said. 'Stay near me. Don't go away again. Keep hold of my hand. I'm frightened all alone. And talk to me, say something, tell me anything. I'm going to die. What have I done to be left alone here to

die like a dog? They'll never come to find me. They said they would, but . . . . Talk to me, talk . . . .'

'I'm here, old fellow,' Joseph said softly. 'I'm talking to you. I won't let you die. They'll come back for us, sure they will. You can count on the lieutenant.' Joseph stroked his face. His hand was full of dead dry skin, it grated across Jules's hairy cheeks. He managed a laugh. 'There. I've got hold of you. Can you feel me squeezing you? Try and stay still now. You'll fall asleep again. Remember, I'm coming to see you at Dijon.'

'Yes,' Jules said.

To the north, behind the hills, a big fire had sprung up. They heard nothing, but they could see the light of the trembling flames. The artillery man called out a name, his wife's perhaps.

'Yes,' Joseph replied, 'I'm here.'

The man started talking but he choked and his voice rattled in his throat. Joseph could only make out, '. . . my boy, my little one . . .' and then '. . . she's alone, alone . . . .'

'It's all right,' Joseph said, 'don't worry.'

The man's voice ended in a grunt, then he spat out clots of blood on to the blanket. His breath came easier. Jules was sleeping

Now what exactly did the lieutenant say, Joseph thought. He told me to stay with them. The van would come back soon as possible. It is true? That means immediately. No . . . it means . . . yes, as long as the ambulance post is down there. The van empties its load and comes back for another. But if it's further away, it takes longer. Now what's the name of that part of the world? Bezoncourt? Bezancourt? Yes, that's it, Bezancourt. So, the van goes to Bezancourt, empties its load and comes back for another, simple as that. As long as they don't find any more wounded on the road. With four on one side and four on the other, that makes room for eight. If they could only do something for Jules at once, I think he'd be all right.'

Dawn took them by surprise. The artillery man was dead. He broke off abruptly in the middle of a long sigh and that was it. Jules was still asleep. There was some colour now in his cheeks, but the lower part of his face was pale.

'He doesn't look too bad,' Joseph muttered. 'As for the other fellow, well, it was only a thread of life that kept his chest up. It's hollow as a broken roof now. I'll have to cart him off somewhere. We can't leave him here for the flies. Should I wait till he's stiff? But if I wait too long, Jules'll wake up. The thing to do is fold him over my shoulders.'

He tested the weight of the corpse at the hips. 'Off we go now . . . No, wait a minute.' It wasn't easy to lift him all the way up. 'Let's go now, old fellow, let's go,' he coaxed him. Gradually he edged the corpse up on to his shoulders. 'There we are!' He walked across the field and laid him down behind a hedge. Then he took off the badge from the uniform and read the name: Celestin Bourges.

The day was blocked with mist. No trees in sight, no hill. Everything was hidden behind the wall of mist. All you could see was the grass where Jules was lying and then a black mark, the trunk of the apple tree where the artillery man lay dead.

Is the van coming? Joseph asked himself time and again. There was a foul stench all around. Joseph stood up and looked at Jules who was still deep in sleep.

Where could this smell be coming from? He went over to the corpse. The ground was wet beneath it, but the smell didn't come from there. In fact it was fainter there, but grew stronger when he went back to Jules. So? He kneeled down and put his hand on Jules's shoulder.

'Jules,' he said, 'wake up, old fellow. Gently now.'

'What? The van! The van's here?'

'No. it's not the van. Listen . . .' Joseph's voice trembled. 'Listen, I've got to look at your wound.' He drew back the blanket. The smell was overpowering. He pushed aside the ragged trousers, undid the bandages, then took out the one they'd left rolled up in the hole. The stink knocked him back. And what a sight! The wound shook and foamed like boiling milk.

'Help!' Joseph shouted, without thinking, as though calling to somebody beyond the mist.

'What's up?' Jules asked quietly.

'Nothing, old fellow . . . I thought I heard the . . . They'll be coming soon. Are you in pain?'

'No, I'm stiff all over.'

'Are you thirsty?' Joseph asked.

'Don't make me think.'

'Drink a little, it'll do you good. Now I'll pull the blanket up again.' He threw away the rotten bandages.

The stiffness had risen up Jules's body and forced back his head until he looked as if he had been tied to a post. He seemed to be looking up at his hair. His eyes stayed open even when he slept. His lower jaw jerked up and down. His thick white tongue lolled between his lips, he started babbling incoherently.

'Joseph,' he suddenly screamed. 'Joseph.'

'Yes, old fellow, I'm here, I'm listening to you.'

'Listening to me? But I didn't say anything.'

'That's all right, I'm still listening,'

'Tell me something, Joseph, talk to me.'

Joseph put his arm under Jules's head, but couldn't lift it. His whole body was stiff as wood. He lay down close beside him. 'Listen,' Joseph said, 'I'm going to tell you something . . . .'

'Yes . . . .'

'Chauranes, that's the name of my farm. It's at Valensole, on the plain, surrounded by almond trees. You'll have coffee in the kitchen, then Julia will say, "Get me some green nuts, I'll make some of that wine." We won't use all the nuts for the wine, we'll put some in a jar with brandy to keep them green. And her mother knows how to make a tasty jam from that . . . .' Jules appeared fast asleep, but then he said: 'Yes, go on, the nuts . . . .'

Joseph lay stretched out close against him, but Jules couldn't feel him, couldn't feel anything. Joseph's only hope was to stay tight against him, talking to him from the heart, trying to pump the life back into him with his own heart.

'. . . so, the nuts,' Joseph went on. 'If you have to leave on a cold morning, before having coffee, there's a rule on the plain. You cover a nut with jam and put it in your mouth, you chew on it for a long time. The sugar oils your gullet, you'll be all right, it's warmer than wearing a scarf. You'll see, old fellow.'

'Do you have any vines?'

'Old ones. We all do up there. My father wanted to pull them down. He said it'd make it easier to get to the barn. But I wouldn't let him. Three of my vines are still giving enough grapes to fill a small basket, but the

rest are too old. Vines don't grow well in our part of the country . . . . What's up, old fellow, are you in pain?'

'No, no, it doesn't hurt, but talk to me, talk.'

'There's a field of corn under the trees that stretches out for miles. Sometimes you don't hear anything for a while, then you hear the corn rustling. We've got four goats and a big horse called Titin. When the soil's damp, we ride over the clods, and it's like being on a boat. Anchors away, Titin!'

Jules's breathing followed the rhythm of Joseph's voice. The voice lifted him up and carried him along. Jules hummed like a small child rubbing against its father's cheek. '. . . and Julia gets dressed up and we go to Bras, which is down near the river Asse. It's dry in summer and you can walk across stepping-stones. That's where Julia and I first held hands. We stayed under the oak tree whispering little nothings to each other, looking into each other's eyes. You know something, I'm not the forward type and . . . Are you in pain?'

'Yes, but talk, talk . . . .'

It was only when the night came that Joseph tired of holding the stiff cold body in his arms. He got up and looked at Jules for the last time. Then he took his badge off, checked to see he had the two badges in his pocket and set off along the road. His footsteps echoed in the indifferent silence.

# The Bluebottle

'Madeleine,' Julia said, 'if you want to do something useful, put the rabbit in a basket and take it to Miss Delphine. She saw her father the day before yesterday and told me her sister's coming from Paris.' And in the fine afternoon, Julia winked at her slyly, while Jerome read the paper.

The road from Valensole stretched out flat under the almond trees, then it turned abruptly on the slope and continued to the edge of the plain through a wood of oak trees. Autumn was trickling to an end. The vines had already lost their leaves and the wind, ignoring the stroke of noon, went on blowing until evening, carrying its many-coloured clouds. Sometimes the wind blew right on into the night.

Madeleine stopped under the last almond tree, opposite the Gardettes's farm. Oliver was near the sties cleaning the pigs. She saw the forkfulls of manure steaming on the ground. She wet her lips and whistled loudly. Then she gave four long, spaced-out whistles, the signal for their four o'clock meeting. Oliver came out of the sheds and looked around. She whistled once again so that he would see her. Then Oliver waved and also whistled. The tone of his whistle said everything that ran through his head. Yes, my lovely, at four o'clock. A nervy wind exhausted the oak trees

and the smell of strewn leaves rose up from the earth.

This little moment, Madeleine thought, this little moment we have at the end of the day to see each other. I'll walk along with him on my left side and that way I'll see his eyes because the sun's still glowing on the right. If he meets me under the oaks, up by the chapel. we'll be able to kiss . . . . Eight more days and he'll be going away, him too . . . .

She walked down the road that led to the church. There was nobody outside the door. Looking through the windows of the houses, she could see the ashes stirring in the fireplaces. In the square, near the fountain, a little girl was pushing a big load of olive branches through the wicker gate of the goat-shed.

'It's me, miss, with the rabbit.'

'Come up, my girl.'

'Clémence,' Delphine said, 'here's Jerome's girl. Now where are you going to put that rabbit? Madeleine, you know what you could do to help me. You could kill it for me. It's Friday, and given this weather and a little vinegar, it'll last until Sunday.'

'Not in front of me, you don't,' said Clémence. 'I can't help it, that's something I can't stand. Oh, no, my girl,' she said to Madeleine who was already holding up the rabbit by its hind legs.

'Take it into the kitchen,' Delphine said. She sat down in an armchair and rubbed her stout knees.

'I don't know how you can stand it,' Clémence said.

'I don't care for it that much,' Delphine said, 'but it's got to be done, so we do it.'

Madeleine gave the rabbit's ear a sharp blow with her fist. The blood poured out from its muzzle into a bowl.

'Skin and clean it for me, will you?' Delphine called. 'You'll find an apron hanging up behind the door, with the board and chopper. That's a good girl. And now,' she said, turning to Clémence, 'go on with what you were telling me.'

'Where was I up to?'

'When the lorry driver left you at Gargan and you met that man in shirt-sleeves with an accounts book or something under his arm. Oh, yes, and then there was the little girl crying "Papa" behind him, and next came the African cavalry!'

'That's right, the fields down there were full of African cavalry. You could see them galloping up and down and one of them was cutting grapes off the vine with his sabre . . . .'

'That's it, the sabre . . . .'

'Before I go on,' Clémence said, putting her plump red hand on her sister's arm. 'I must tell you about the rabbit, Delphine. Don't make a stew, because the blood cooks too quickly and loses all its taste. This is what you do. You put the meat in a pan with onions and tomatoes, and when it's cooked, just before serving you pour in the fresh blood. That way you'll taste it.'

'But with some thyme too!' Delphine said.

'Some thyme, of course, and everything else as usual, and it'll turn out like I said . . . Now, where was I? Well, I was going to Villeparisis. It was deserted. There was an ambulance at the Annet crossroads near the limekiln. I went up to the major and said, "Sign this paper for me." He looked worried, he kept glancing outside and held his pen in the air, but he signed it for me. Afterwards I said to him, "You don't believe me, sir? And what about Jablines?" "The bridge is blown up," he said. "So?" He rolled up a bandage. "A soldier will see

you across," he said. "Hurry along, we'll have the wounded up here any minute now. Off you go, lady, we've no time to lose." Fierce as a bear he was! Then a soldier came up to me with a bandage round his head. "Give me ten sous," he said. I couldn't choose but to give it him . . . Oh, lots of things happened down there, Delphine. And when you're a woman, you know . . . All through the day the roads were packed with people leaving, then a little boy passed by all alone carrying an egg. A goose followed, calling after him, and the boy called out to the people ahead of him. I tell you, everybody looked crazy! In the middle of the night the house started creaking and I heard a noise on the shutter. I buried myself under the blankets. The next day I saw what it was. The ivy. It had tried to pull the shutter off. I waited by the window all day with a stick, and when it got too close I broke it down. All that time they'd been galloping across the road. And so many of them! The bugle kept blowing on the other side of the Marne, and down there, far away, I could hear gun-fire and cannons booming. At last it was too much for me and I blocked my ears. The next morning I told myself, "You'll write to Delphine when you're in Paris and then you'll go to Valensole." When I got to Annet I saw Shumacker tied up to the railings outside the villa Coquette. Why? I asked myself. You remember him, Delphine, he was the one who used to make such pretty shoes. Why? I asked myself. Dead he was, tied up there, dead. And there were so many flies buzzing on him the poor thing was moving under their weight.'

'It's done,' Madeleine said, opening the kitchen door. I've hung up the skin at the window, put the liver in a bowl and thrown out the bile. I've cut the paws and sprinkled its belly with vinegar, like you said. The tripes are in the bucket. But you should go and cover up the rabbit, there's a bluebottle in the kitchen.'

Madeleine wiped her hands quickly on the dishcloth. Her body shook when she thought about the rendez-vous whistle. She was about to leave when her father came in. 'Come here,' he said, 'come and read this letter. Give Julia a call.'

Through the window, in the spring air, she could see the blue tops of the mountains above the almond trees, and down there, under the oaks, Oliver would be whistling.

'Oh, it's always the same . . .' Madeleine muttered.

'What's that?' Jerome asked.

'Nothing. Give me the letter.' She closed the window and took her brother's letter.

'Julia!' the father called.

Julia's big healthy body took up all the doorway. Her thighs were plump under her skirt. She ran a hand through her hair, black and shining like oil at the bottom of an earthenware jar.

'We've got a letter from Joseph,' Jerome said. 'Read loudly, Madeleine.' Leaning on his stick, he turned his good ear towards her. Julia looked out of the window, towards the spring, the mountains, and the almond blossoms.

' "Dear wife and father . . ." '

'What's the date?'

'March 22nd . . . "Dear wife and father. Here's some good news for you. When I got the parcel we were on the march and you know my feet don't take too kindly to the road, so I waited. Thank you for the meat pie. Please send me some lard because I need it as usual to rub my feet. I can't walk for an hour without getting blisters. It's not so bad now that I've got the slippers, I put them on as soon as we arrive. But they let the water in. I was glad to get a card the other day from cousin Maria and hear she's taking life in her stride. I wanted to reply, but she scribbled the address and I can't make it out. If she's changed her farm, she'll come to Chauranes for sure. I know her. Be sure you don't lend her my old plough. That's what she's after. And as for getting anything back from her! . . ." '

'Wait a minute,' the father said. 'Come to think about it, Julia, how is that old plough?'

'It's hung up by the hook and the handles,' she said. 'I had a look at it. The wood's straight. It hasn't warped and it's nearly a month now since I poured on the remains of the oil.'

'That's good, because we have to think about using it. Maria's at Saint-Firmin, isn't she?'

'Yes, at Chauvinières near Saint-Firmin.'

'Read on . . . .'

' "Life isn't much fun here, but there's nothing we can do about it. Let's hope we'll all soon be home. It was snowing a while ago, now it's raining. Don't forget the lard. Dear wife, I was at a farm where they've found a use for pig manure. I saw them putting it on the little plants. But it burns them up, I told them. They told me no, because it's the piss which burns, so they make a drain for the piss to run down and then they can use

the dung. The ground isn't bad at all, it's been taken over from the landowners. Remember the fellow I told you about who came from Perpignan where he worked in a shoe factory, well, he got killed yesterday, but it was his own fault. They've told me that we may be going to the real fighting. I can't tell you where it is, but you must have read about it in the papers. Don't worry. It isn't even certain yet. Anyhow, we don't have any choice. Oh, I've got something else to tell you. A fellow from Valensole who's got relations at Colon told me that Bonnet's son had been killed. Tell his mother how sorry I am. Also I want to tell you what dolts you are for missing the Casimir farm. It was up for sale so you should have bought it, even if it wasn't ready yet for planting. I'll look after that myself when I get back. And how are things with Casimir? You told me his son, Oliver, is going to the front, so this time don't miss the opportunity. Those young ones always want to play the hero. Even if he doesn't get killed, there's only the grandfather and the mother and they might want to sell the land at the foot of the hill. That would be fine for us. Father, keep an eye on what's happening there. Soon as Oliver leaves, look the ground over. I don't seem to have anything more to say. A kiss for my sister, Madeleine. Don't forget what I've told you. I'm thinking about it. I kiss my dear wife and father. Joseph." '

Julia sighed. She took the letter from Madeleine, folded it and put it in her pocket.

'He's right,' the father said. 'We haven't been very smart. I'll go have a look at Gardette's place this evening. It's Oliver's last . . . .'

Julia interrupted him with a glance. 'The man from the town hall is already on the fields,' she said.

'Who did he want?' the father asked, scarcely opening his lips.

'Not us,' Julia said. 'He was opposite the door and when he saw me come out, he signalled to me to say no.'

'So who did he want?'

'It's Arthur, Arthur Buissonnades.'

'Arthur!' the father exclaimed. 'That tall fellow? Felicity's husband? The one who was so good at plucking grapes? The one who helped us the year of the storm? Is that the fellow?'

'That's the one,' Julia said. 'Felicity's alone with the child.'

'Give me my stick,' the old man said. 'I'm going there. A woman can't stay alone on a beautiful day like this with all that on her mind. What wretched times we live in!' He took his stick, went out and banged the door. Madeleine pressed her face to the window and watched her father. He hurried as fast as he could along the Buissonnades' road.

'Too many have died,' Julia said. 'Too many. It doesn't seem possible. Arthur! You remember, Madeleine?'

Madeleine's tears streaked down the window.

'And we're all involved, you know,' Julia said. 'Madeleine, that's something we don't think about often enough.' She went back to the cattle-shed.

The window felt cold against Madeleine's forehead. The glass was misty with her tears. She could no longer see the green corn, the almond blossoms and the swallows. Arthur! He was never that close to us, but that doesn't make it any easier to bear. A handsome man he was and so well built! And how he could laugh! The whole world was heavy with mist. If she opened the

window everything would be clear again. She'd feel the fresh wind. She'd see tulips and watch the almond blossoms falling. God pardons us for not always thinking about death.

At the crossroads, Jerome had already caught up with the man from the town hall. He could already see the Buissonnades's farm through the trees.

'Alberic!' he shouted. 'Wait for me.'

The man stopped. He was in no hurry. They could hear Felicity calling to her chickens.

'You walk so quickly,' Jerome gasped, 'I've lost my breath.'

'Really? I thought I was going at my usual steady pace.'

'So, how are things?' Jerome asked.

'How do you expect 'em to be?' Alberic turned his head to look at the almond blossoms.

'Come here, you little chicks,' Felicity called below.

'You got good news from Joseph?' Alberic asked.

'A letter, this morning, and you . . .' Jerome didn't dare go on.

'And me? Yes, again!'

'Arthur?' Jerome asked.

'Arthur!'

'Life's a shitty business,' Jerome said.

'We're the shits,' Alberic said. 'Shitty men, you should say.'

'Arthur of all people,' Jerome said. 'I never knew a finer fellow. And what guts he had and what a damn hard worker he was.'

'Ah, Jerome,' Alberic sighed. 'But there's no way out. We've got to tell her. I haven't been leading a real life for a long time. Every day I see these sheets of paper, every day, wherever I am. The first one included the usual kind of praise—the country! the field of glory! If I don't get the lists in the morning, I wait and tremble until they come. Every time I open one of them now I feel as though I'm being led to the slaughter-house. Oh, I earn my money for the work I do, believe me, I earn my money, and the news I bring nearly breaks my own heart! You get used to people, you know. You're going to Arsène's, I tell myself. When you arrive, the mother'll be there and the wife will be near the kitchen sink. I can see it all. They'll turn round quickly to see who it is when I open the door. And it's me, Jerome, it's always me!'

'Godforsaken times!'

'You can say that again. They look at me, their lips dry as burned grass. I told that to the mayor. He said to me: "Seems to me they'll get used to it." Get used to it! Get used to that! No, that'll never happen, it's against nature!'

Felicity saw them coming, stopped feeding the chickens, and held her hands up to her eyes to distinguish them clearly. She recognized Alberic and let the maize fall from her apron. There was a riot among the chickens. She ran through them to the farm. Jerome and Alberic walked on slowly. They opened the door. She had understood everything already. She was bent down across the table, her face pressed against the wood, and she banged the table with both her fists. 'No!' she cried 'No!'

'Mary,' the schoolmistress said, 'you're the tallest, look after them. I can't cope after what's just happened.'

During break Mary told the children she'd be taking them home.

'I don't live with you,' Albert said.

'I mean I'm taking you all to your own homes.' Mary explained, 'I'm the tallest.'

'Let's measure,' Albert said.

'To start with, if anybody plays the fool I'll give him a slap and then I'll tell teacher.'

They walked through the village up to the plain, greeting everybody along the way with a loud good morning, monsieur, good morning, madame. And everybody laughed. Mary had to warn Albert a couple of times to behave himself. At last she smacked him and shook him like a plum tree. He was using filthy language and pulling the girls' pigtails.

'Tulips! Tulips!' Paul called out when they reached the plain.

They all started running

'Tulips! Striped ones! Red ones, look! Yellow ones! They're all over the place.'

They plucked so many they had to sit down and share them out. Their fingers were stained green from the juice. André sucked his fingers. Another slap.

'Don't you know it's poison!'

'It tastes so sweet.'

Mary had to wipe his fingers with a handkerchief. They made nosegays and set off again singing: 'Hey ho! Hey ho! Handsome is as handsome does.'

They sang through the whole song to help them along the road. The sun was bright and the shadows from the clouds hurried across the fields like a flock of sheep. Sometimes these shadows fell across the road, darkening everything. Raindrops fell sounding 'plop' in the dust where they remained intact. Then all the children looked up at the cloud.

'Just look at it!'

'It's like a horse!'

'Like a cow!'

'Like a goat!'

And then the sun came back and the shadow sped on as if it had been making fun of them. It passed by right ahead of them, riding over the slopes as if they were molehills. They sat down again in a circle. Their hands were full of narcissi, tulips, violets, daisies, and grass to add a little green. Nothing could be prettier. They didn't know what to sing now. Paul carried his nosegay in front of him like a candle. He danced round the circle chanting: 'War! War! War!' The swallows made them laugh. Antoinette thought she could catch them easily as flies. She clapped her hands in the air everytime one flew near, but she soon gave up.

Then Jerome arrived from Chauranes. 'What are you doing here?' he asked. 'What about school?'

'School, school, school,' they chorused.

'Teacher told us to leave,' Mary explained. 'There's no classes today. She's just heard that her brother's been killed.'

'Is Paul Buissonnades here?' Jerome asked.

'Yes,' Paul said.

'Come along,' Jerome said. 'Come along, give me your hand. Your mother's looking for you. You'd better throw away your flowers.'

'Yes,' Oliver said, 'I wanted to take care of the goats as this is my last evening. And to see you. Didn't you hear me this morning when I whistled?'

'Oh, I heard all right,' Madeleine said. 'My blood's been boiling ever since. I just prayed you'd understand. My father came in at the last moment with a letter.'

It was evening now. Oliver's goats were on the untilled ground. He was wearing his soldier's trousers and his puttees. The trousers were blue as the sky. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up to the elbows showing his red arms. And his handsome curls had grown again.

'Those things you're wearing,' Madeleine said, pointing at his puttees, 'they make your legs look like a horse's.'

'They're not very practical,' Oliver agreed. 'Madeleine,' he said slowly, 'it's our last evening.'

'Our last evening,' Madeleine echoed.

A little shorter than Oliver, she looked up at him. Her auburn hair was loose, with a strand of blonde on top. She started crying. They sat down on the slope listening to the goat bells. Oliver took her hand. He looked down in front of him, holding back his thoughts.

'Madeleine,' he said after a silence. 'If you feel like waiting for me, wait.'

'I'll wait,' she said. 'I've got no choice, Oliver. The others don't mean anything to me.'

'That's how I feel about you,' he said slowly, 'but I wasn't sure if you . . . .'

'Believe me,' she said, 'I'm always thinking about you, I'm always with you. I see your eyes, I see your teeth, I hear your laughter. I came to Briançon when you were there and stayed close to the mountain-side. He's up there, I kept saying to myself, he's up there.' They remained on the slope. Oliver edged his arm round Madeleine's body.

Then he called to his goats. He gathered the little herd together on the road and with Madeleine at his side he pushed them ahead towards the farm. Their hands were linked together. They stopped at the end of the oaks. There are two paths there, one goes towards the Gardettes's farm, the other towards the Chauranes's.

'This evening,' Madeleine said, 'we're going to Felicity's, Julia, father and me.'

'My mother's going too,' Oliver said.

'Then you must come,' Madeleine said, 'I'll see you again.'

'I'm leaving about midnight,' Oliver said, 'on foot. Father'll accompany me to the Durance.'

'Come to Felicity's,' Madeleine said.

'I'll come.' He watched her go away. She turned back to wave good-bye. He stayed there watching her until she was hidden by a big flowering almond tree and finally disappeared in the night.

A tough little wind brushed the stars.

'Go in first,' the father said to the mother, 'Oliver's going to leave his haversack and his stick here. It wouldn't be right to enter the house of the dead with things that only the living can carry. Leave everything in the straw there,' he said. 'Stand the bottle up straight and lean the stick against the wall.'

Except for an occasional cough, they didn't hear a sound down there in the front room of the farm.

'Come on, now,' the father said.

The front room was full of people. The sideboard, the cupboard and the kneading-trough had been moved away. The straight-backed chairs were lined against the walls. The visitors were sitting on the chairs around the empty room. There were no flames in the hearth. The

ashes had been brushed together into a heap in the middle of the hearth, a sign that there'd be no more fire. In the middle of the room there was a bare table; a yellow wax candle was burning at each corner. Everybody from the plain was there. They had all come, the old men, the women and the little girls, and they were sitting stiffly on the stiff chairs. They sat in the depths of the shadows. They looked at the empty table and the candles, and the light from the candles mellowed their hands laid out flat on their knees. Every now and then somebody coughed.

Felicity was wearing the mourning clothes which used to be in the cupboard. Black skirt and black bodice, and over her head she wore a black shawl which suddenly aged her. They could only see her red eyes and her crumpled mouth. She stood at the door to welcome the last visitors.

'Your sorrow is ours,' the father said.

'Thank you,' Felicity said. Young Paul was close to her, dressed in his Sunday clothes with a blue ribbon under his chin. His hair had been dampened to make a parting. 'Thank you,' he said, too.

They were coming from all over the plain. You could hear their steps outside and their voices. Then, as they drew near the door, they all grew silent. They whispered. Felicity was waiting, stiff and black near the door. They came in and held out their hands.

'Your sorrow is ours.'

'Thank you.'

'Thank you,' Paul repeated.

Felicity sat down at the head of the table; Paul sat down close to her on a high chair. His feet didn't reach the ground. Old Martha stood up then and came towards Felicity. 'Do you have the pot of salt?' she asked.

'Everything's ready over there,' Felicity said, pointing to the corner near the hearth.

Martha went and took the pot. She came back to the table and placed herself opposite Felicity. The dead man might have been stretched out on the table. They waited. They held back their coughs. The silence thickened.

'We are gathered here,' Martha chanted, 'to watch over the absent body of Arthur Amalric who was killed in the war. Let us all treasure in our thoughts our friendship for one who was the salt of the earth . . .' She dipped her hand into the pot, took out a handful of salt and sprinkled it in the centre of the table. She untied a large rosary of olive nuts from her dress and kneeled down close to the table. The silence returned.

'Oh, my Arthur!' Felicity cried out. She was rigid as wood. She looked straight ahead from underneath her shawl. 'Oh, my Arthur! You were such a fine man! Telling me to think about myself. Oh, I've got something to think about now, something to think about until my own death.'

The drone of the refrain rose again. 'Let us all treasure in our thoughts our friendship for one who was the salt of the earth!'

Oliver looked for Madeleine. She was on the other side of the room, looking at him. He could see her plump little mouth repeating the refrain. He saw the tears shining in her eyes. He had already said twice: 'Let us all treasure in our thoughts our friendship . . .', but now he was silent. They looked at each other fully in the eyes and now neither of them said anything. This time he is completely dressed from head to toe in his

soldier's uniform. He is marked. He's going to leave. To look at Madeleine, his gaze passed over the bare table, over the little heap of dead salt shining in the candle-light. He imagined he heard the rustling of Madeleine's skirt when she walked with him across the fields. if I was the lamp, he thought, if I was the lamp, the tree, this table, the sow, I'd stay behind, I'd remain here. If I was the dog . . . .

'Oh, my poor Arthur!' Felicity cried out. 'I'll never see you again. You went away and I'll never have you here again. If only I'd been there to close your eyes for you. Oh, my poor Arthur, dead, all alone in the earth like a dog. And here . . . here there was so much for us . . . .'

'Let us all treasure in our thoughts our friendship for . . .' Suddenly Madeleine cried out: 'Oliver!' The father had signalled to him. He stood up. There was a sudden silence in which Felicity turned towards Oliver and looked at him without saying anything.

'Good-bye, Mama,' said Oliver.

Delphine nodded. The father and Oliver approached Felicity. She stood up and touched Oliver's hand. 'Your sorrow is mine,' she said to his father.

He thanked her. Oliver looked at everybody to say good-bye. They were all crying now without trying to restrain themselves. All round the room there was crying as they remembered all those who had already left, and those who would never return.

'My poor John!'

'Bartholomew!'

'Andrew, my poor Andrew!'

'Good-bye to you all,' Oliver said.

He looked at Madeleine. She turned towards him, her face streaming with tears. He raised his arm in farewell and backed towards the door.

'Let us all treasure in our thoughts our friendship for one who was the salt of the earth!'

'The bottle,' the father said in the shadow. 'Drink. Oliver drank and handed the bottle back to his father. 'Let's go now,' the old man said.

They reached the Durance. At the bottom of the plain, through the willow trees, they could see the red and green lights of the station.

'I'm stopping here,' the father said. 'Let me look at you.' He lit a match. In the night, over the flame, they moved their faces towards each other.

'Remember what I told you,' the father said. 'Don't do anything more than you've got to do. The only thing that counts is that you return.'

The match went out. They folded their arms around each other in the darkness. Suddenly Oliver pulled himself away and set off towards the station. His father succumbed to the emptiness of the night.

Oliver looked at the man who came in. He was in the Service Corps. He wore a large, roomy greatcoat and his leggings were heavy with mud. He carried a wicker cane under his arm.

'Bertha!' he called, rubbing his hands together. 'Bertha, it's cold and grim outside. I need a drink. Where's she got to? Bertha, you old whore, fetch me a brandy!'

He sat down close to the stove, almost covering it with his huge thighs. His coat steamed in the heat. His complexion was reddish. He sucked his moustache and breathed heavily. Bertha brought him some brandy. The soldier slapped her arse. 'You're a nervous one, eh, Bertha,' he said. 'There's nothing better than nerves and bone.'

'Enough of that,' she said. She wriggled away carefully so as not to spill the brandy. The soldier pushed his big head close to the girl's hips.

'I like 'em when they lash out a bit,' he said. 'If you're waiting for the brigadier, you'll have a long wait. He left for Bar early this morning.'

'You can say what you like!' Bertha said, 'but it's company.' She moved away, her pale lips sagging wearily.

The soldier looked at Oliver. 'Here's to your health,' he said, then he drank. 'What company you from?' he asked.

'I'm joining the reinforcements,' Oliver said.

'On what side?'

'The valley.'

The soldier drew nearer to Oliver and winked, pointing to the kitchen where Bertha was rinsing the glasses. 'You wouldn't think so,' he said, 'but every now and then, an old moaner like her can make life really rosy for you. But she's after the nobs. She's had the post-orderly, the field-marshal, and now it's the brigadier. Always occupied. So, you see? . . .'

They heard a horse trotting by and the soldier jumped up to open the door. 'Daumas! Daumas!' he shouted. 'Stop here, you old goat!'

The man was riding a mule. He trotted on towards Bar and waved. He called out, but his words were lost in the noise of the road and the sound of empty water-flasks clanking on his back.

Oliver stepped outside. Closing the door, he felt the heat from the café warm his back one last time. His gear was heavy. 'Off we go,' he said to himself. 'Quickly now. When you're tired you've got to warm yourself up.' He carried with him the steel hoop of a large barrel. There was fog ahead.

The troopers were going along at a slow pace in the fields. They moved with the supple silent strokes of swimmers. First they appeared grey, then black, then grey again, until they were gradually hidden in the entwining strands of the mist. Carts covered with tarpaulin humped their backs and passed by. Cyclists danced like grasshoppers on the tracks of the corduroy road. On both sides of the road were big fields, flat and

empty. You could hear the mud hissing all alone. Down there, at the bottom of the valley, there were villages perhaps. There was a smell of boiling coffee. From beyond the fog came the ceaseless groaning of the earth under the enormous weight of transport. It was a dull, hollow sound, like the swaying of the sea. A roll of cannon-fire erupted in the mist. Oliver slid down into the ditch. He felt the weight of his sack sharp as a knife on his shoulder. 'Sons of bitches!' he shouted.

There was a reek of dung. He heard the trampling of horses, their whinnying and the shouts of men. A hammer struck soft iron then sounded on the anvil. And in tune with it he heard mallets striking wooden stakes. He could make out the grinding of axles as a tank struggled through the soft mud of the fields. There was an encampment of horses and vehicles nearby. A sudden burst of red fire showered Oliver in mist and smoke. He jumped high into the thick air, his knees drawn up to his chin, then he stretched out his legs and as soon as his toes felt the ground he set off again. Men were running all round him, carrying big black pliers and wire cutters.

The landmark was covered with mud. You couldn't tell if the valley was down there ahead or how far away it was. Oliver let his sack drop into the damp grass. The mist had lifted a little. There was hardly any noise now, except for the groaning of the earth and the whistling leaves of the poplar tree. The fields on either side opened up their big flat wings.

There was a man down there in the fields. Every now and then he stopped and looked around, then, staring ahead, he moved towards something. The thing turned out to be a small tree. He leaned against the trunk and touched it with his hand. He caressed it, muttered to himself and shook his head.

'Hey, there!' Oliver shouted.

The man turned away from the trunk and looked up. After a last caress, he decided to come. 'You're from the artillery?' he asked.

'No,' Oliver said, 'I'm in the Hundred and fortieth.'

'Hundred and forty, Hundred and forty,' the man repeated with the deep singing voice of mountain people. 'You're not the guy who tied the mule up to the tree?'

'No.'

'You shouldn't do that, you know.'

'It wasn't me, I told you,' Oliver said.

'All right, but you shouldn't do it, no, you shouldn't do it. I've been telling 'em that for some time. It makes 'em laugh. Are your laughing?'

'No,' Oliver said. 'I know all about that. The mules eat the bark.'

'You know that!' the man exclaimed in astonishment. His eyes were clear as water and hardly moved. His gaze was keen and penetrating.

'Yes, I know,' Oliver said.

'Touch my hand, my lad,' the man said.

He was a soldier, but he wore a small jacket and carried no arms. There was a big Sam Browne belt round his stomach. His body was heavy on his legs and his pouch banged against his thighs when he moved. 'And what's your name?' he asked.

'Chabrand,' Oliver said.

'Mine's Regotaz, I'm in the 140th too. You see,' he said, pointing to the number marked on the right lapel of his jacket. 'I've just been out to look around a bit.

I'm going in now, I mean I'm returning. The two of us can go along together. The valley must be about six miles from here.'

A big beech tree loomed out of the mist, water pattered on its leaves. From below them they heard the mallet-like taps of a stream down there running through the grass. They had reached the forest. It stretched out before them, heavy, black and rumbling.

'Give me your haversack,' Regotaz said. 'Take it off and give it me to carry. Come on, I know what I'm talking about. I need it, or I won't get back this evening.' He buckled Oliver's haversack on to his own shoulders.

'I need it to keep me to the road,' he said. 'Hey! Do you smell that? Wait . . . listen . . . there!'

An animal halted in a bush, then started running through the dead leaves.

'It's a vixen, I tell you,' Regotaz said. 'And what's that?' They heard a louder noise.

'I tell you I need this load on my back to keep me stuck to the road. I'll stay close to you and that's how I'll get back. Otherwise, knowing me, I'd fall asleep in the grass!'

They made out an animal passing by on the other side of the bushes. It was a horse dragging a piece of wood through the mud. The day was a clear steely blue now. A light wind chased away the mist.

'Sons of bitches,' Regotaz said, spotting a large strip of bark in the mud. 'Sons of bitches, you see what happens to the trees!' He was about to take off the haversack, then he changed his mind. 'No,' he said, 'on we go.'

He rolled up his jacket sleeves and unbuttoned his shirt-cuffs. A large scar was stamped on his arm. The silence increased as they advanced into the forest. The trees blotted out the heavy noise of transport that made the earth tremble, and the crumbling sounds in the sky. You could only hear branches crackling, and, further ahead, dogs barking, cocks crowing, the sound of water-drops and the pattering of mist as it drifted through the foliage. The forest breathed in and then swelled out its huge chest of branches. Regotaz halted.

'Tell me, my lad, do you think I'm crazy?'

'No,' Oliver said. He looked at Regotaz. He could see the other's eyes were filled with fear as he struggled to look beyond Oliver's words into his eyes.

'No, you don't look crazy to me,' Oliver said. 'I let you do the talking, but you know I think the same as you. I come from the land too. I'm not as old as you yet, but I know how to adjust myself to things. That's something only you and I can understand.'

Regotaz sighed with relief and set off again. 'There's more than that to it, my boy,' he said. 'The way I see it there's more than that to get along with. Maybe it'll turn out the same for you too. I'm telling you something: in the end it'll be too much for you too. That's what sometimes makes me tell myself I'm mad. Where can you turn to? Where can you turn to when you carry ten times more than your own share of troubles? You tell yourself, No, I don't want any more, I've had enough, I can't take any more, I'm only a man. But all the time they're loading you up with more . . . Too much misery! You understand? Where do you turn to?'

A willow tree softly shook its heavy dew into the grass.

'. . . I've got Frederic in my squadron and Louis Butte and many more, and as many as you want in the café. But I'm telling you something, lad, because you

look like one who'll understand. Their hearts are rotten. It's not their fault. Perhaps they went along all right before, kept a straight path, got tipsy now and then and wandered from one side to the other, but on the whole things weren't too bad. It's now their hearts are rotten. And the hell of it is they're not really bad, but if you stay near 'em too long you'll feel something rotten. So, what can you do? I don't know if I told you before, I was a butcher. I come from the high lands, those heights up there where there aren't any forest trees. If you lose your head up there, you can cut down everything and there's no risk. But I keep my head, so I ask myself, What about those trees?'

A rabbit leaped across the road.

'It all happened one day under the apple tree. I was lying on my blanket in the grass. The top part of the branch was clear, the bottom all wet and black. There was a hell of a noise near Verdun! The air was coffee black and jolted by fire, like a coal-mine going up in flames. And down there, Louis Butte was getting pissed, and he tore up the picture of his wife, then the one of his little girl, and threw away the pieces shouting out: "Shit! Oh, shit!" Then he stood there at the door, lost, and the poor bugger was crying. So, I was telling you, the branch was clear and dark, there was a bend in it, then it pointed up into the day. There were hardly six leaves on it. It seemed such a small load for a trunk that huge!'

He spoke quietly, puffing under the weight of the sack. 'Do you have any tobacco?' he asked. 'Give us a pipeful.'

'You can have a packet,' Oliver said. 'I've got three in my haversack.'

'Mine'll be waiting for me up there. Marcel must have put it on the side for me. They gave us our rations yesterday. You know, I've been away two days now.'

'You'll catch it, won't you?'

'No, they know me. "Regotaz," they say, "that one, he's nuts. When he gets back, send him to me." The last time the chief asked me if things were getting worse, I went out and found a corner where there's nobody, you'll see, down there, behind the church. "Yes, my lovely, I'm here," I said. "What can I do for you? Here I am" And I could hear 'em calling out for me: "Regotaz . . . Emile . . ." In the morning I jumped on a passing lorry. The fog was thicker than it is now. The kid who drove went so slow he might have been in a funeral procession. You couldn't see more than two yards ahead. I grew calmer as we went along, but it was as though I could still hear them calling for me. Suddenly the kid slammed on the brakes. We stopped with a jolt. He was peering out at a body stretched out there across the road, real big it was. He asked me what it could be. "I've arrived," I told him, and I kept saying to myself, Here I am, my lovely, here I am . . . I told the kid not to get frightened, it was the forest. I left him there and took the little road . . . .'

They had reached the edge of the wood. The day was opening out, streaks of grey light flew by in the wind. They could see grass and a hillside beyond the trees. The noise that the forest had stifled reached their ears again. Rumbling of transport and thumping in the sky, shouts and calls. The noise increased with each step and the air grew hot like the breath of an animal close behind you. They were soon clear of the trees. Down there, at the bottom of the valley there was a big village. It opened out like an oyster, flat on the meadows. You could see the ant-like activity within it. Convoys of

cars and lorries droned under the poplar trees on a dried-up canal bank. A small engine shook its tail of wagons full of bales of straw. They could see it, all nerved up, its little wheels turning, jumping, whistling, spitting into the grass. Another stationary engine, its wagons loaded with wood, waited patiently for it. Now and then it gave a peaceful whistle. A convoy of tarpaulin-covered general service trucks crawled down a sloping road opposite. A troop of men marched in a line along a road below. They entered the village by a side-street. A saw-mill was singing. The sound was deep when it was at work, then light when the blade was free. There was a sharp smell of dead leaves and sawdust, and then an unpleasant, sugary taste that was rotten on the tongue. A Red Cross ambulance passed by at full speed. A bus was moving along with difficulty. Oliver turned to watch it pass by. A huge chunk of skinned and bloody ox was tied up to the back platform, leaving a squirting trail in the mud.

'You see my trees,' Regotaz said, 'you see 'em, my lad!' They were lined up near the saw-mill. The bark was still on and the branches were covered with leaves. 'And look at that!'

A piece of meat big as a fist was lying in the mud. The blood was red and black and there was white mucus in the fibres. A scrap of gauze was still stuck to the part of it that seemed alive. Oliver looked away, towards the forest.

'It might well be a man's meat,' Regotaz said. 'Very likely, you know. I wouldn't be astonished if it had dropped off the stretcher from a body that was already torn to shreds. You know the way the ambulance goes . . .' And Regotaz swung his big body from side to side to imitate the lurching of an ambulance.



'They're firing on Pont-Rouge,' Joseph said.

The wagon driver pulled the reins tight and stopped his two mules. He listened. 'So it seems,' he said.

They might have been breaking up big planks down there behind the small hills.

'There's worse in store.'

They set off again. They had left behind the last houses of Soissons and the paved road. The road was soft now under the wheels, its holes patched with mud and packed with stones. Streams of water white as plaster ran in the ruts.

'They're certainly working hard.'

'Only thing to do is stop at the sugar-works,' Joseph said. The fields on each side of the road were covered with still water that reflected the steely blue sky. Small white clouds weighted down the bright sun.

'You know,' the driver said, 'I said to him like I told you. "Lieutenant," I said, "the thing to do is make a track from the sugar-works to Seraucourt. It passes by Creutes. The whole way is lined by trees and there are no crossroads." I heard him ask the sergeant-major who I was. I wanted to tell him I'm Matthew Bomier and I know what I'm talking about.'

'They're shitheads,' Joseph said.

'No lieutenant's going to teach Matthew Bomier his

job, I wanted to say. Fifteen years' experience with wagons in all the slag-heaps of Saint-Etienne. And we didn't have wagons as good as this one. If I say we can make it, we can make it. I'm no child. I was a father before he learnt to sneeze, but no . . . .'

'You've got children?' Joseph asked.

'A couple. That's why I'm here. And you?'

'No, I've only been married a year.'

'You've had time . . . Yes, I've got a couple, old fellow. A little girl who takes after her dad, real smart she is, and a kid who's greedy as his ma. He'd suck the milk out of Paradise if you gave him half a chance . . . You know, it sounds pretty bad down there.'

They had passed the first bend in the road and could see all the countryside under the sunset. Full of trees, it ambled out in front of them. The greasy stream that had flooded all the meadows twisted in the middle of a wide stagnant marsh dappled with the reflections of clouds and tufts of grass. There wasn't a living thing in sight. The shafts of a steeple stuck out of a clump of shrubbery. A big farm was completely wrecked. Crows were pecking at its broken windows and the bones of animals littered the meadow water. Beyond the stream, the torn earth revealed its chalk, and the countryside was flat, devoid of trees and men, up to the distant crests convulsed by smoke and lit by flashes.

'Sapigneul,' Joseph said, looking at the horizon of shadows and fire.

'Is that where you're going?' the driver asked.

'No, I'm going to spy out the land on the left, towards Montgermont. We'll be going up there tomorrow. It won't be much better than where we are, and even if it is, with the buggers we've already had to deal with, I expect . . . .'

'You were billeted down there near the canal?'

'Yes, the seventh.'

The Pont-Rouge was suddenly hit by fire. Black smoke blew across the small hill and climbed up, tree-shaped and leafy.

'They're bent on shooting up the place,' Joseph said.

'We're going to wait at the sugar-works,' the driver said.

They drew near. They had only to climb a small seeping hillock, like the back of a sweating animal. It even smelled of sweating animals and streaming water. But there was also the smell of burned powder. The fields were hollowed out by shell-holes. The sugar-works lay ahead of them, a kitchen wagon smoking against its walls. Two men in overalls were looking at the road, waiting for the soup. It was already night, but they could still see the trees lit up by the bursts of shell-fire. Rockets were exploding near Sapigneul. One of them hung up there in the night like a lamp.

'Hey! You in the canal there!' the man shouted. His hand squelched in the mud, looking for Joseph. That was the only sound, that and the moaning of crowds of men below.

'Stay flat,' Joseph said.

A big shell hit the sugar-works, followed by a volley of shots. Heavy clods of earth fell back into place.

'Stay flat.'

'I'd lost you,' the man said.

'I haven't budged. They'll be firing like that for some time. Wait a bit. They'll soon leave for Pont-Rouge. Then we'll make for the corps.'

The night thickened. The kitchen wagon, disembowelled by the first shells, was now splayed out in flames on the road. The mud hissed with carbon. Shot to pieces, a man hung over the wagon, his head resting on the bottom. The horse was down on its knees, moaning and shaking its head. Soldiers lay stretched out around a wine barrel, motionless, except for one who, face in the soil, clenched his hands to secure himself on the ground, find support, get up again and set off. A gaping wound in the neck weighed down his head.

'I'm going to see my donkeys,' the man said.

'Stay there!' Joseph shouted. 'Stay there!'

But the man moved. Joseph saw him struggle along, looking like a toad, arms and knees bent. His flat face was stretched out, mouth open, and his big eyes reflected the fire of the kitchen wagon and the night.

'Stay there!'

The man jumped forward and at the same moment there was a flash of fire. He fell back in a heap on the road, raised his back, swung from left to right, then collapsed.

'Hey you! What's your name now? Hey!' Joseph shouted. He edged towards him in the darkness. He stumbled first against a cold corpse lying on bread crumbs and kitchen implements. There was raw flesh in the mud.

'Hey!' Joseph called out quietly. 'Hey, you! What's your name . . .' He touched a body. It was the man's. He neither moved nor breathed, he might have been a lump of earth. Joseph listened to the sound of blood gushing out of him.

Oliver shouted. He ran through grass and fire. He had lost his gun. He kept on shouting out for help, his mouth wide open. The ground shook with gun-fire. He ran through the smoke, through the explosions, through the hot claws that tore up everything around him. The shells sent into the air clods of earth that fell back and hit him in the belly. Shrapnel flew around him, over him. There was nobody in sight. He was alone. Through the smoke he glimpsed the long stretch of empty ground full of holes and shining water, and further off he saw the remains of a tree, its branches pointing to the sky. A hand grasped him suddenly by the ankle and he fell down.

'Shut up!' a voice said.

He found himself in a hole, a man's piercing eyes stared at him. It was Chauvin, the corporal. 'Shut up!' he said. 'Why you running? Can't you see it's failed?'

'What's failed?'

Seeing those eyes, hearing that dry little voice, Oliver felt warm again, secure.

'The attack,' Chauvin said. 'We're still twenty yards away and they've got all the machine-guns. Stay there! Crouch down!'

Oliver breathed deeply, a long, shaking sigh.

'It's the first time?' Chauvin asked.

'Yes,' Oliver said.

'Stay there!' He added to himself: 'Oh, hell!' After a moment's silence, he said to Oliver: 'We'll wait until evening.'

'What about Regotaz?' Oliver asked.

'I don't know. Have you got your shovel?'

'Yes.'

'Dig on this side,' Chauvin said. 'Throw the earth out carefully. They mustn't stop us.'

Oliver set to work. Sometimes the edge of the tool hit something solid, and however hard Oliver pushed the shovel couldn't get at the earth. He started digging with his nails. There was a strap there in the earth, like a sleeping snake. He dragged it out and set to work again with the shovel. From the corner of his eye he looked at Chauvin who was also digging. He was crouched down like an animal and he ripped up the earth with strong blows. His neck was red and round, the big muscles worked as smoothly as pistons. He grunted between his teeth. They heard the machine-gun at work above the hole, tearing everything to shreds with its iron claws. Its big feet clicked, then its heavy body shuddered. It shook and jumped like a bird, scratched its metallic body, and made the earth smoke under its talons.

Chauvin looked up. 'The buggers,' he said. He started digging again. His head was so low that his moustache was thick with mud. 'Your haversack?' he asked Oliver.

Hunched up in the hole, Oliver spread out a jumble of straps, equipment and buried cloths. A heavy, sweet stink of rot filled the hole like syrup.

'Your haversack!' Chauvin shouted.

'What?' Oliver said, looking up.

Chauvin drew so near to him that their helmets touched. 'Your haversack,' he said. 'Your haversack. You've got something? Something we can eat?'

'Eat!' Oliver exclaimed in amazement. He looked abruptly at the hole where he'd been digging and smelled the rot.

'Yes,' Chauvin said, 'eat.' He stayed there without moving his face an inch away from Oliver's. He looked at him fixedly. At the bottom of Oliver's haversack, beneath the grenades, there was a chunk of bread covered in rust. He gave it to Chauvin who broke it in two.

'Half and half,' he said, handing a slice to Oliver. Suddenly he bent low and shrivelled up as a big shell hit the hole. Where Oliver had been digging the shovel was stuck fast now in the earth. When he took it out, it was oily with a black grease like cobbler's wax. He didn't dare continue digging.

Kneeling down, Oliver chewed at the bread. He sensed somebody behind him. Somebody looking at him. He turned round. A man was stretched out on the other side of the hole. His face was completely black, his brains poured out of a large wound in the corner of his head. No, he wasn't looking at Oliver. A small, round, white piece of that brain was looking. It was stuck on to the black space of the eye that swarmed with rot and mud.

Malan pushed open the door of the Workers' Guild.

'Close the door, Firmin!' they shouted to him. 'Close the door, it's freezing in here!'

They were all gathered round the big stove warming their knees and thighs and smoking their long pipes.

'You're like little almonds,' Malan said 'frightened of the cold.' But he pushed his chair into the group. 'Come on,' he said, 'move over. Lord knows I need some warmth myself.' He took out his pipe. It was all white from the mouth-piece to the bowl.

'Is that new?' Pancrace asked.

'Just bought it,' Malan said.

'You have to smoke it slowly, eh?' Pancrace said.

'Slowly,' Malan said, 'with pauses, and when it's hot you shouldn't put it on cold stone.'

He took out his large pig bladder tobacco pouch.

Holding the nape of his neck with both his hands, Oliver cried out: 'Me! Me!'

The blast had blown his helmet off. It had happened without warning. There was a sudden rumbling in the sky and the earth foundered. Oliver could hear the hum of silence now, but it was the silence inside his ear drums, for the earth was still spurting up around them. Oliver heard his voice coming from far away, it might have been somebody else's.

'Me! Me!'

Then he heard another cry of pain, long and deep like the noise of water gurgling out of the wash-basin. He looked under his arm. Chauvin had been knocked back into the bottom of the hole. He was bent up double over his belly, looking up at a pinch of blue sky. His eyes were like stone. Both his hands floundered in his open belly like he was mixing cement. His hands went round like windmill sails and his guts stuck to his wrists. He stopped crying out. He was all entangled in his tripes. Straightening his arms, he drew them out of the hole in his belly. Oliver took his hands away from his neck and looked at them. There was no blood.

'No,' he said, 'it wasn't me.'

But a need to vomit overcame him. It rose up, puffed out his cheeks, pushed apart his lips, and he opened his mouth in a long lonely vomit-laden cry.

'Round Verdun,' Malan said.

'This,' said Clerestin, tapping the glossy magazine with the flat of his hand, 'this has to be seen to be believed. These photographs, they're fixed I tell myself. It isn't difficult. Old Lauzit, he knows how. If your nose is twisted, he makes it straight. He should photograph you, Burle, he'd make you look really handsome.' Burle took his pipe from his mouth.

'Saint Labre making fun of his dog,' he said.

'These are real corpses, though,' Clerestin said, taking another look at his magazine. 'There's no doubt about it. German corpses . . . .'

'Verdun,' said Malan with a grim chuckle. 'Just imagine what it's like! They've got reinforced concrete forts. And inside 'em there's everything they need and more. There's kitchens, and books to read, and refectories, everything's organized . . .'

'So where does the killing happen?' Burle asked.

'What?' said Malan. 'Say that again?'

'Where do they kill 'em, then?' Burle said.

'Who, I'm asking you?' Malan said.

'The men! That's what I'm asking you,' Burle said. 'Where do they kill 'em?' And he looked at everybody around him, gazing at each in turn for a good while. He looked at Malan, at Clerestin, at Pancrace, he looked at them all sucking their pipes and at their lifeless eyes that reflected the frozen blue air outside.

'To the captain,' a voice said in the shadow.

'What does he want?' Joseph asked without looking up. He was sitting on the roadside chewing a large slab of cheese. 'What does he want? I've explained everything to him.'

'He said that you're to come, that's all.'

'Oh, go tell him to . . . Well, where is he?' Joseph asked, getting to his feet. 'And you, where are you?'

'I'm over here,' the cyclist said. 'Mind my wheel.'

Joseph dragged his feet out of the mud and started walking through the dregs of the night. He just managed to keep up with the cyclist. He was overcome by exhaustion, overcome by the night, by the mud, by hunger and by a need to sleep that felt like an iron band around his skull. He had been up there already this evening and the sight he'd seen had been far from wholesome. His mind was still choked with memories of it, his heart was sour and his legs weighed a ton. Going back up there to face all that again! There was hardly any noise. Sometimes he heard a cough or the sound of a mess-tin against the butt of a gun. Otherwise there was silence, but not the peaceful silence of fields and grass; it was a thick, heavy silence pressing down like a lid. The air was charged with sombre, twisting clouds.

'Who's that?'

'Liaison,' Joseph said.

'Where are you going?'

'To the captain.'

'Are you the one who went to reconnoitre?' It was a young, clear, girl-like voice that made you think of morning and sunshine and the crowing of cocks.

'Yes,' Joseph said.

'And how are things?' the young officer asked softly.

'Not too good,' Joseph said.

He heard the captain groaning in the bushes.

'It's my belt,' the captain said. 'My back belt, I'm telling you. It's hung up there. No. don't pull it, Mr Reverchon, have a look.

'Liaison,' Joseph said.

'Ah, there you are,' the captain said. 'Yes, thanks, that's it,' he said to Reverchon who had freed his belt. 'And what were you doing?' he asked Joseph.

'I was eating, captain.'

'I was eating! He was eating! Didn't you have time to eat before leaving? I need you here, you understand, next to me, at my boots. So, where are we here?'

'Here, captain, we must be near the windmill.'

'We must be near the windmill! Are we or aren't we? And how near? What the fuck have you been doing? Did you go and reconnoitre? Do you know where we are, yes or no?'

'We must be near the windmill, captain. I went up by Pont-Rouge, that's on the route. We turned left a little while ago at the crossroads. I don't know that part of the countryside. And what with the dark . . . .'

The captain sighed in exasperation and stood up. 'Listen to this, gentlemen!' "I don't know that part of the countryside." That's the answer I get, and then "And what with the dark . . . ." That's liaison work for you! Do you have your maps?'

'We went to get them, captain.'

'Oh, yes, that's true. Good, Reverchon, go and make sure they're not sleeping in the artillery sections down there. I don't want 'em to sleep, and tell that officer to come here too. Now,' he said, turning to Joseph, 'come a little closer. So, you can't tell me where we are. But the area that you've seen, do you know it?'

'Yes, captain, I know it.'

'And?'

'It's not too good.'

'What do you mean, not too good?'

'I went out to reconnoitre, captain. There's no communication trench just after Vrégny. That part's O.K.

You take route 13. There's a tunnel. After that, it's bombarded day and night, everything's broken down. We'll have to pass over it.'

'We'll pass over it,' the captain said.

'It's knee deep in mud,' Joseph said.

'So we'll go through the mud. Now, where are the parts that aren't too good?'

'There's a canal afterwards, captain, with a foot-bridge. The machine-guns are hitting it. I've marked the spot.'

'And after?'

'The first section is on the right up to the edge of some trees, and the rest of them branch off towards the left, up to hill 120. There are no trenches.'

'What! No trenches?'

'It's all mud.'

'And the shelters?'

'There are no shelters, captain. They've gone down like shit into the mud.'

'No shelters. Not one?'

'Not one,' Joseph said.

'Where was the other captain when you got there? He must have been in a shelter. Which one?'

'He was in a hole,' Joseph said, 'lying flat, holding on to his gun. I even asked him: "Where's your captain?" "It's me," he said.' They heard lieutenant Reverchon and the young officer arriving. Joseph cleared his throat. 'At the foot-bridge, captain . . . .'

'Well?'

'You got to be careful at the foot-bridge. They've got machine-guns and repeating rifles aimed at it. There's mortar-fire all around. The other captain told me they've got their eyes fixed on it day and night. At the slightest noise, they use a searchlight and open fire. The other evening they kept on firing for over an hour. All they hit were rats running across the planks.'

'Here are the maps,' the lieutenant said, as soon as he arrived. 'The officer had them. You'd given them all to him before leaving.'

'Captain,' the young officer said, 'you told me you'd ask when you needed them.'

'All right, all right,' the captain said. 'We're ready to leave now.'

The company was already lined up on the road.

'Can we put on the light?' the captain asked Joseph.

'Yes, we're behind the hill.'

The captain lit the electric lamp and shone it on the men. All along the line their eyes glimmered underneath their helmets. They looked startled, like sheep when you suddenly hold a lantern to their faces.

'This is what we sang,' Malan said.

He cleared his throat and spat into the ashes of the stove.

> If I was a swallow
> Where would I fly?
> To a place where I could rest
> On Saint Helen's isle.

'It's a waste of life, I tell you,' Burle muttered through clenched teeth. 'It's a waste of life. Just take a look at yourselves, sitting there smoking your pipes! You know what it does to me? It makes me feel as though I'm walking through a vineyard with my feet thick with dung!'

'You're no Christian,' Malan said, 'that's what's wrong with you. There's no talking with you. Off you go putting on your big airs. And that booming voice of yours is loud enough to knock the walls down. So, what would you prefer?'

'I'd prefer nothing,' Burle said. He rubbed his knee slowly with his hand and he lifted up his eyes under those thick eyebrows to look at Malan. 'I know what you're going to tell me,' he said, 'but none of it, you hear me, none of it's worth a man's life. Think of all his days full of pleasure and all the happiness and peace he can rake in with his hardworking hands.'

He raised his left hand with the pipe in it. The long tube, with its blob of spittle at the mouthpiece, shook in the air. 'Just to build up your life,' he went on, 'to feel it rising up and know that you can lean on it. Nothing else counts. You can't measure anything against that.'

'You don't have no son,' Malan said. 'You don't have nobody. So what you making a song about?'

Burle turned towards Malan, but he kept his pipe pointed at Firmin and shook it at him as if to say, What I say to Malan goes for you too, for all of you. 'No,' he said, 'I don't have no son, I don't have nobody. I'm alone, it's true.'

He unclenched his teeth and spoke out slowly, deliberately. 'But you know what I think about your war? So much the better. Though God knows we always wanted to have children. Wanted to have them so much that I used to pass through the villages kissing other people's kids on the sly. But now I tell you, so much the better. You think you're defending your own children sitting round the stove there! No, I don't have any, but I know what it is. I haven't lived in houses, me, I've lived in huts and cabins. I haven't rested my feet, no, I've walked in front of my sheep, among my sheep. I've lived all my life among animals and I've seen much more of life than any of you. I've seen life in all its grandeur and force. I've seen it in its totality from the earth beneath my feet to the top of the stars. And you know what you're doing now? Do you, Malan? I'll tell you, you who's got three sons, you who eat and continue eating and sleeping. Do you know what you're doing? You're walking over your son's heads with your feet thick with dung. You're trampling in their mouths and eyes, yes, you, Malan even though you're sitting close to the stove here, warming yourself, smoking your new pipe!'

He stood up and pushed back his chair with his knee. 'I can't take any more,' he said. He tapped the tobacco carefully out of his pipe, and as he did so he looked at them all, one after the other. Each had fixed his gaze elsewhere, on the stove lid, on the bottle of wine, on the poster on the wall. None of them cared to meet Burle's look. He walked quietly over to the door and went out.

'Halt! Halt!'

All those who had crossed the canal ran into the glare of the searchlight. Their backs hunched up under the machine-gun fire, they disappeared into the ground. Only the round glare remained, moving silently, shining on the mud and the dead.

'Halt!' Joseph called out. He was stretched out against the bank of the canal, hidden in a black hollow from

the searchlight. 'Halt!' Why don't they halt? Can't they hear the shouting on the foot-bridge?'

He could hear the shouting and the slap of feet on the water. He looked over his shoulder without lifting his head. There was a guy down there still hanging on to the planks of the foot-bridge. He was trying to get up again, but the pack on his shoulders pulled him down. Joseph saw the searchlight spot him out. The foot-bridge bent under its load of corpses. 'Vairon! Vairon!' It must be Couchepot hanging on to the planks, because he's calling out for Vairon. And Vairon, where's he got to? Among the dead? Or maybe he's safe, far off down there stuffing his ears with earth so as not to hear.

'Yes,' Joseph said, 'I'm coming.' He moved his big shoulders. Immediately the searchlight fastened on to him. A hail of bullets spattered the night. He crouched down again, made himself small and didn't move.

'Quickly, Vairon, quickly!'

The machine-gun ground up the wooden foot-bridge and the flesh of corpses.

'Quickly! Quickly!'

'Oh, God,' Joseph sighed.

'Quickly!'

'Ah, Vairon!'

And now the machine-gun bit into something warm and living, it drilled through the soft flesh.

Couchepot's bulk shattered the water. The foot-bridge swung more easily now and whined softly.

At dawn, at the hour when the earth gives off its vapours there was always a truce. The dew sparkled on the greatcoats of the dead. Light and green, the early morning wind blew straight ahead. Water creatures were splashing at the bottom of the shell-holes. Red-eyed rats walked quietly along the trench. Rats and worms were the only living things there. There were no more trees, no more large furrows, no more grass. The hillside had been skinned down to its chalk bones. A mist rose gently. You could hear the silence pass by with its slight electric crackling. The faces of the dead were buried in the mud, or they jutted partly out of the holes, peacefully, with their hands resting on the rim and their heads lying on their arms. The rats came to sniff them. They jumped from one corpse to another. They selected the young ones first, those without any hairs on their cheeks. They sniffed the cheek, then they crouched down into a ball and started eating the flesh between the nose and the mouth, next the edge of the lips, and eventually the green apple of the cheeks. Every now and then the rats cleaned their paws in their whiskers. When they came to the eyes, they scratched them out slowly and licked the eyelids. They bit into the eye as though it it was a little egg and chewed it gently, slanting their mouths to suck up the juice.

Before dawn was over, the crows arrived on their strong, steady wings. They sought out along the tracks and paths the horses which had been knocked over. Close to these horses, with their stomachs burst open like the flowers of the caper-plant, there were wagons and overthrown cannons mixed up with scrap-iron, bread, meat provisions still wrapped up in gauze cloths, and yellow sticks of cannon powder. The crows flew on to the intersection point of the communication trenches. the spot where you had to get out to cross the road. The remains of all the men from night fatigue duties were lying here. They were stretched out, soup pans over-

turned on their legs, in a mush of blood and wine. Even the bread which they'd been holding was full of shrapnel and bullets. The damp red crumbs, swollen by the men's juices were like the bits of round bread which they'd dip into wine to strengthen their stomachs during harvest-time. The crows ate away at the bread and at the same time they stored it in their claws, hopping from one foot to the other. They even pushed the helmets back from the heads of the dead. They were newly dead, still quite warm sometimes and only slightly paler than usual. The crows pushed at the helmets. Sometimes, when the corpse was lying in a position to defeat the bird's purpose, the crow pulled at the beard until the area of the neck between beard and chest hair was exposed. The meat was tender there and quite fresh, the red blood still formed into a little ball. The crows started pecking at once, tearing off the skin, then they ate solemnly, calling out now and then to their mates.

The dead stirred. Nerves twitched in the stiffness of rotten flesh, an arm rose up slowly in the dawn. A black, splayed-out hand pointed to the sky. Overswollen bellies burst open. A man writhed in the earth, trembling, all the strings of his guts let loose. An iota of life stirred again in him. He swung his shoulders as he used to. He swung his shoulders with that characteristic gesture which made his wife recognize him in the midst of a group. Then the rat hurried away from him. But it was no longer the force of life that made him swing his shoulders, it was only the mechanics of death. Very soon he fell back again immobile in the mud. Then the rats returned.

Even the ground, with its big piles of dung, quickened its movements. It shook like milk at boiling point. Glutted on flesh and blood, the earth panted with all its force. In the middle of huge, upheaving waves, a living wave reared up, then the tumour cracked like a crust of bread. That happened in pockets of the earth into which too many men were crammed. The paste of flesh, cloth, leather, blood and bone rose up. The force of the rot made the bank burst. Mother crows clicked their beaks with worry in the nests of green and blue cloth, the rats pricked up their ears in the holes which were heated by the hair and beards of men. Big balls of fat white worms rolled over as the bank collapsed.

As day broke, the muffled rolling of a large convoy came from beyond the desert. Rivers of men, tanks, cannons, lorries and carts rippled down there in the hollows of the hills, followed by loads of corpses, the food of the earth. But the day took its time before rising. A trimming of light passed ahead first of all on the shattered horizon, then a pale fire slipped between the clouds and flowed like water into the winding trenches. That was all. It seeped out into the immense space of sky and earth, and it stayed that way, the colour of old grey straw. It was day.

The father had gone up to the edge of the road. He looked at the man who was climbing towards them. Mother Fine twisted her apron.

'You see him,' the father said, 'it's him.' He clenched his fists.

The man took his time, dodging through the grass to avoid the mud. You could see the shine on his yellow shoes. He wore overalls like the horse-dealers, but the buttons were undone, showing the cloth of his jacket

underneath, the clean collar and the handsome tie. Two policemen followed him.

'Hello there, everybody!' he called when he was ten yards away.

The father waited for him to come a little nearer. 'Hello,' he replied, with little welcome in his voice.

The other cleaned his shoes in the grass. 'You got to go through a lot of mud to get up here. Where's it coming from?'

'The fountain's broken,' the father said.

'Ah,' the man said, 'it's broken.'

The father blocked the road with his solid, aged body. That way he kept the man and policemen on the slope of the hill, on a part of the ground that didn't belong to him. He stood straight, his clenched fists at his side. There was earth on the skin. The man put his hand into the opening of his overalls. He took out his watch and a sheet of paper. He looked at the time. He shook the paper, holding it out to the father. 'We've come for the goats,' he said.

The father kept his fists by his side. 'There are no goats here.'

The man slid the paper across his lips and whistled softly. He looked at the policemen. 'We can take a look.'

'You've seen it all,' the father said.

The man took two steps towards the father. You could clearly see that handsome, silky tie with a big steel pin fastened to it. The father put his fists on his hips so as to block the whole road with his jutting elbows.

'Father!' his wife called.

'Leave this to me.' He turned to the man, 'I said you've seen it all,'

'Yes, but we'd like to take a look, all the same,' the man explained, holding out his forefinger. 'Here's the paper. It's the levy.'

'The levy for what?'

'For the goats.'

'Father Chabrand,' one of the policemen said, 'it's the levy for the goats. It's for the Indians, for eating, you understand? We know you've got six, you might as well admit it.'

'Yes,' the father said, 'I've got 'em and I'm keeping 'em. Your Indians can go to hell.'

The man shrugged his shoulders. He could see that the wife was trembling with anxiety. The old man was the only obstacle.

'Come on,' he said to the policemen, 'we're going up. It's not our fault if he's pig-headed.' He moved forward. But the father shook his fist at him.

'At your own risk,' the father said. 'Take one more step and I'll get hold of your neck. You may be as proud as Artaban but I'll give you such a shaking that you'll lose your fleas for ten years. Take care! Big as you are, you won't weigh more than a feather in my hands.'

'Father!' his wife cried.

'Leave this to me,' he replied. 'This is a man's business. I say what I mean. And another thing. Here's a word of advice for you. Turn your feet round and get back to where you came from. Up here we're not used to being ordered around by anybody.'

'He's crazy,' the man said. 'We're going to pay you for them.'

'No!'

'You have to!'

'No!'

'He doesn't understand. You have to, I tell you. It's for the Indians, for the war, for the war!'

'That's enough,' the father said, 'that's enough. Don't make yourself hoarse. I understand, I understand only too well. The war! But me, I'm telling you no, and no it is! All right, they need men for the war, and corn, and sheep, and horses, and goats. They need everything, everything! And why do you always go looking in the same places? And you, what are you doing here? There's a lot of flesh on you, you know.' He turned to the policemen. 'What's this fellow doing here? There must be a place for him up there. Somebody's surely been killed today, that makes an empty place. You think it can go on like this? Our son, our horse, our corn, and now our goats. Do you intend to leave us our eyes for weeping? You better had, we're going to need them. Anyway, who's the madman in charge of all this? Who's the madman who gives the orders?'

The man had backed away from the father towards the policeman. 'There's no time for discussion,' he said. 'It's always the same thing. Yes or no?'

'No!'

'You refuse?'

'I refuse.'

'You'll be hearing from me.'

'Thanks,' the father said, 'that'll be a pleasure for us, but don't write too often.' A laugh full of anger and distress broke from him as the men turned away. 'Give me my hat,' the father said, entering the farm. 'I'm going to see the mayor. And don't worry, my girl. If it had been a real levy we'd have received a notice. They'd have sent out the town-crier. The guard would have come. This is nothing. And those two policemen who stared at the ground. There's something odd, I tell you. Give me my hat. I'm off to see Baptistin.'

The air was fresh that morning, fresh and golden, neither hot nor cold. There was a nervous little tickle of a breeze. The sky was clear and clean. Pulling his big black hat down over his eyes, the father walked with his head bent. He should have walked with his eyes closed, for as it was he could see the road disfigured by hard, arrogant weeds, and the cart road where the white and brown parts were no thicker than a thread. Scarcely any men passed along there now. Big fleshy hemlocks had eaten through the ruts and all the clear part of the road. The winding, makeshift path in the middle was already corroded by the scurf of red behen. The father walked over it with his hobnailed shoes. He trod heavily on the weeds to crush them, to leave his trace, to defend the road, the passage of men and everything that was being effaced in the upheaval of the times. There were no more ploughs to cross the land, to circle round the big plots of red earth. There were no more spades and no more hoes, no more picks and no more carts. There were no more of those swing-ploughs which the men used to carry on their backs up to the uncultivated parts to gain a little new land. Everything was running over now. The earth abandoned herself to viburnum and thorns and to those wild vines which stifled everything under their long, nervous, hundred-fingered hands. It was as if all the drunken ploughmen had been pushed into an area where they wrestled until they broke each other's backs. And everything was overrun. Fine could almost hear the torrent of grains and roots flowing from the hills. Junipers burst open in the middle of the fields. Thick balls of dodder fattened like ticks in lucerne-

fields. Everything would be lost! Only the sun remained, the rain, the wind, the earth. And they were free of men. The life of ancient times was starting once again.

The old woman was sitting on the stone bench in front of the town hall. With her hands crossed under her apron, she look very wise.

'Oh! Aunt Mie,' the father said. 'What are you doing there in the shadow?'

'I'm waiting for my boy,' the old woman said. 'He's up there being examined.'

'Up where?'

'At the town hall, of course. He's gone to see the council.'

The big doors of the town hall swung open, revealing a corridor full of dust.

'Are you serious, Aunt Mie?' the father asked.

'I'm serious,' the old woman said, 'I'm not joking. He had to go and see the council. He's so nervous that I thought I'd better be here in case he has an attack. They left him in a ditch last time. He was half suffocated when I found him. So, I've come to wait for him.'

The father looked up at the windows. The curtains had been taken off and the panes were clean. He looked inside, saw the shine on a peaked cap, the white of overalls, then the slightly green paleness of naked flesh.

'Alberic,' the father said, coming across the guard in in the corridor, 'tell Baptistin to come. I just want a couple of words with him.'

'Go on in,' Alberic said. 'But you'll have to wait a couple of minutes. He's busy with the council.' He opened a door. There was a smell of human sweat and of cattle-sheds. The men undressed there, then they waited completely naked. In another room somebody called out a name and one of the men would pad across in his bare feet.

'Weigh him!'

'Fifty kilos.'

It took a moment for the father to recognize everybody there. Usually he only saw them dressed. You can hide a lot underneath a jacket and trousers: mushroom marks of hernias on the belly, shoulders completely broken in the middle, chests curving inwards, crooked legs, scrofula, scabs and blotches. That fellow whose buttocks were all red with blood was the notary. He had kept his pince-nez on. He tried to laugh.

'So, you too, grandfather.'

'It'll happen yet,' the father said.

The mayor came in. His eyes were bulging and his swollen neck hung over his celluloid collar. He drew the father into a corner.

'I know, Chabrand,' he said, 'you must have come about the goats. You're the third already. No, you mustn't give anything. No, it isn't regular. It's someone from Marseilles who's buying the goats for the Indians. But on his own account, not for the State. So, to hurry things up he's invented the levy. He gives the policemen a hundred sous. No, don't give anything, nothing at all.'

'You should have let us know, Baptistin. He must have got 'em from others since he didn't get any from me.'

'I'll tell you something,' the mayor said, lowering his arms helplessly. 'I no longer know where I am. My head's spinning. I'm here one moment, there the next, at the kiln, at the windmill. I have to be everywhere, do everything, think of everything. It's not my job, I

don't know where I am any longer. I should be at the En-chau land to harrow today, but I'm here instead. See what I mean!'

The father looked at the naked men. 'Speaking of that,' he said, 'I saw old Miette below. What about her son?'

'They've taken him.'

'Didn't you tell them about his attacks of dizziness?'

'I told them all right, but the other fellow jumped at my throat. "I've got my orders, Mr Mayor!" he shouted. "I've got my orders. If they pass the inspection, that means more men. How much does he weigh? Sixty kilos. Fine. The height and the weight, that's all I know. If he falls, we'll see. Let's go!" I have to go myself now,' the mayor said. 'Good-bye.'

The father pushed his hat over his eyes and sighed. He passed in front of Aunt Mie without speaking to her. She was still there, wise and patient, her hands crossed under her apron.

The soldier came out of the darkness of the third-class waiting-room. He went over to the sentry. 'Lewis,' he said to him.

Before replying, the orderly looked into the station-master's office. He could see him inside. He'd unbuttoned his uniform from top to bottom, even the collar. His thin shirt covered his belly which was squeezed against the table edge. He was carefully making a red and blue pencil drawing of a rosette on the blotter.

'What?' the sentry said.

'Do you have your flask?'

'It's hanging by the bed.'

'I'll tell you why,' the soldier said. 'Gustave's found a barrel of Bordeaux at the end of the rails near the signal-box. He stuck his bayonet into it. Someone's down there stuffing the hole with his finger. It's pissing out all over the place. They've filled up all the buckets and plates. I'm going to fill your flask.'

Under the night wind the whole empty shell of the station sang of iron wings. Long, weary trains panted down there, on the repair-shed rails. In the wagons the bullocks moaned in human distress for the free prairies full of moonlight. A broad train of men slept silently beside a long caterpillar of a platform all bristling with cannons. Two railway officials argued near the signal-lever.

'Open, I tell you!'

'Closed! The 504's on time.'

'Open!'

They both had their hands on the lever. The station-master was tapping on the edge of the table now with his paper-cutter. He sang softly to himself. He had drawn a fine rosette. He drank from his two litre flask, then, with a wide smile, he looked at the filaments of his electric light bulb. The train of men gave a long whistle. It left.

As soon as you entered the village you had to walk over the bundles of brushwood that filled the holes in the road, and red juice sprang up around your shoes. The streams flowed full of blood. Packs of dogs, tails down and eyes glinting, followed the winding stench of death in the air. In the shadow of the open barns, large white forms with short arms were crucified against the walls. Thick bodies were slit down the middle like loaves, only

the cracks were gaping red. It was the butcher's village. The big stone walls made a soft snapping sound under the load of all these disembowelled bullocks hung up on large hooks by their knee joints. A man passed with a bucket in his hand. He balanced another bucket on his head with his left arm. It was full to the rim with congealed blood and tripes.

Another man walked behind him, taking up the whole width of the road. 'Not so quickly, you with the bucket.' He carried a large chunk of bleeding beef on a wattle tray. In the courtyard you could hear the muffled blows of axes striking into skin and hair. The bullock fell. Its hooves scraped the stone slabs. They pumped air into the belly of a sheep. They tapped the swollen belly with an iron rod.

'Hold the door,' the man with the tray said.

Just then another fellow came out, carrying only a minuscule knife, sharp as a needle. Clotted blood was shining on the end of his thick gloves.

'How much?' he asked, holding his broad back against the wall to let them pass.

'Sixty kilos,' the man with the bucket said, 'not counting that.' He pointed to the wastes in the blood.

Through the open door you could see a man in the courtyard. He sliced off the head of a bullock on a block with strong blows of an axe. He stopped every now and then to wipe his moustache which was messy with bits of brain, then he shook his fingers. A scurry of chickens and ducks surrounded him. They were fighting over the spatters of meat.

'Regotaz! Regotaz!' Oliver called.

He knew that Regotaz could no longer hear him, lying out as he was flat on the ground. But the sight of those broad shoulders, the solid torso, and the big legs with the feet turned in made him call. Oliver tried to push him on to his back to see his face, but he was too heavy. He was heavy and at the same time soft to touch. Oliver lay down beside the corpse. He dug his hands into Regotaz's hair, he tried to lift up the face. No more face remained. No more mouth, no more nose, no more cheeks, no more expression. Only pulverised flesh and white, bristling little bones. Just a scrap of forehead was left and that was dripping away into the ground.

'Regotaz!'

The dead man's hand held on to a clod of earth in which a little clump of grass was growing.

Joseph ran up the slope of the path. He held on to his right arm. With his wide open left hand he tried stuffing the hole in the other elbow. It was a mess of bone and flesh. A fountain of blood squirted through his fingers. He wanted to stuff that hole. He ran two or three steps, then he walked two or three, breathing heavily, then he started running again. He couldn't stuff that hole. He grasped it tightly with his left hand, but the blood kept on flowing. As the blood flowed away, he felt air enter him through the hole. He no longer felt that he was in one piece and insulated from the world. The broken up ground, the fire, the powder and the blood of other men, they started flowing into him, and very soon, if it lasted, he would become part of it himself. He, Joseph, his flesh, he'd melt into it all like sugar in water. The black corpse that had its teeth planted into the bark of the willow tree was still there, crouched at the edge of the canal. The sky was rattling

with torrential preparation for the attack. 'The canal! The canal!' Joseph shouted. The canal was there, flattened out in its bed, stagnant and shining with rot. 'And the poplar! The poplar!' Joseph shouted.

He saw the poplar. Just a splintered tree-trunk with the Red Cross sign nailed to it. He looked for the door, tapping the sacks on the ground with his helmet.

'Here,' a voice said.

He was dragged in by the end of his greatcoat. The major turned. 'Hold on to him,' he said. He had taken off his uniform. Bare-headed, shirt-sleeves rolled up, he held a saw in his hand over a man who was bent back double groaning with pain and exhaustion.

'Stay there,' the nurse said to Joseph, 'wait.'

'My arm!'

'Yes, wait.'

'Fabre,' the major called.

'Here!'

The major put his blood-soaked hand on the corporal's shoulder 'That one at the end of the room.' He looked at his wrist watch and breathed through his moustache. They brought up the man who was still groaning loudly.

'Fabre!'

'Yes.'

'Here a moment. Listen.' He spoke into the corporal's ear. 'Get the corpses out first of all. They don't need shelter. We'll need some space. Go ahead!'

'Now you,' he said to Joseph.

Joseph fingered the large bandage. He no longer recognized his arm. Had they stuffed up that hole at least? Had they made a good job of it? He wished that he had looked and then stuffed it up himself, to be really sure. That hole, the rush of air in which he almost disappeared. Joseph fingered the large bandage. It was there at the end, it started hurting. He could feel heat, then the ice of fever winding up his spine.

There was such a stink inside that it filled your throat like mud. Every now and then the corporal went to shake the carbide lamp. At such moments you could see the men at the end of the room and hear them groaning, those were the men who no longer tried to hold on to life, to the earth. The corporal cradled the lamp, as though holding a child. Its tongues of flame shot out towards the end of the room. The men were lined up there. The guy in the middle was the tallest, he had an auburn beard. His nose was as thin as a blade, his eyes were sunken, his cheeks hollow. His forehead was crowned by a bandage saturated in blood which trickled down his face.

'Have you finished?' the major asked.

The corporal put his lamp down. There was a smell of ether, blood and iodine. Dirty bandages fermented in the corners. 'What's the time?' the major asked. He struggled with a man stretched out on the floor. The guy shouted and fought him off. 'Hold him down! Hold him down!'

'It's five o'clock,' Fabre said.

'Come and hold him, I tell you! Keep his arms up. Don't shout. Hold him! That's it! Get the ether, Fabre, and the big bandages. Cut his jacket open. The heart, quickly now, the heart. Good. No, that's enough. Get that stretcher over there and take him to Vrégny immediately. Fripot, you and another guy, go to Vrégny, but not by the road. Take the communication trench,

you hear?' The major wiped his forehead. 'Fabre,' he called weakly, 'brandy.'

The corporal passed him the flask. The major stuck the spout into his mouth. 'Ah,' he exclaimed, sucking his lips. He had handsome, desperate eyes, but the hardness had left them now. He smiled slightly with weariness. The corporal also smiled gently.

'Give some to him,' the major said. He pointed to Joseph drowning in pain and fear, with scraps of ether stuffed in his throat. There was a sudden, telling silence outside that might have fallen from the laden sky. Joseph's belly felt completely empty. The major shook his blood dripping scissors in the air. 'The attack! Fabre, go and see!'

Fabre went out. It was dawn. There were no more shells. He could hear the water chopping in the canal and below, towards the green edge of the dawn, the low, shrill cries of men like the noise of squabbling rats. A machine-gun fired slowly. A bunch of grenades exploded near the windmill.

'Yes,' Fabre said when he got back, 'that's it, they've left.'

'So, now . . .' the major said. He looked around him at the blood and the men. They might have been in a butcher's shop. In that little cavern in the ground, against the canal bank, they had just emptied stretcher-loads of meat. A furious barrage of fire broke up the reserves on the other side of the canal. Iron, fire and smoke fell in heavy showers on the men. The water in the canal shook like a trembling horse. The flame of the carbide lamp went down, then shot up towards the ceiling. The whole cavern shook like the hull of a ship.

'Fabre! Fabre!' someone called outside.

There were lines of wounded men twisted or wrapped up in great coats, jackets and flapping bandages. In the midst of this heap, an exposed unblinking eye stared up at its eyelid, or an arm held up its crushed hand like a grape, or in place of a stomach a puddle grew larger and overflowed.

'Fabre!'

'Stay there!' the major said. 'Go and get some soil.' He pointed at his feet slipping in the blood. Fabre went to get some soil which he emptied around the major's feet. The major prodded his knives into the scraps of flesh. Fabre went out for more soil. He was pale, and looked sick.

'Bandages!'

'Fabre!'

'I'm suffocated!'

'Fabre, throw out the corpses!'

'Fabre! Fabre!' someone called outside.

Fabre ran bent double, his teeth clenched. He slipped and fell on to Joseph. 'I'm sorry, old fellow,' he said.

Still dazed by the smell of ether, Joseph looked at him expressionlessly.

'Throw the corpses into the canal.'

Two men entered with a stretcher.

'Gently now,' the first one said.

The major took a look. 'Dead. Outside. Fabre, more soil.' He wiped his blood-splashed hands across his forehead.

'Mr Major, sir, Mr Major,' one of the wounded moaned.

'Yes, my little one,' the major said.

'I'm suffocating.'

The major touched his chest. It was soft, mushy, and trembled like gelatine.

'Any guys who can lend a hand, come on,' Fabre shouted. 'Let's get the dead out. The air's stifling at the end of the room.'

'Wait,' the major said. 'My lads, my little ones. Listen to me if you can. Look at all your comrades who are coming in. They're worse off than you. Those of you who still got your legs, up you get, you'll go to Vrégny. They'll look after you better down there. You'll have beds. Fabre, give 'em some brandy. Don't leave each other, lads. Stay together. Vrégny's straight ahead.'

'Can you run?' Fabre asked Joseph.

'Yes,' Joseph said. He knew there were trees at Vrégny a cattle-shed. 'Yes,' he said, 'I can run.'

The fire and spattering iron of the barrage was ahead of them.

'After the canal, start running,' Fabre said. He watched them move away weighed down by their bandages. They tried to run when they'd passed the canal, but they couldn't hold out for long. They started walking again. The smoke hid them at times and with their backs bent they moved forward under the menace of fire and iron.

'For pity's sake!' Fabre cried out, his mouth twisted in disgust. 'For pity's sake!'

## *Waiting*

Coming home unexpectedly yesterday afternoon, the butcher found his daughter sleeping with the apprentice. At first he only saw stout Fonsine all unbuttoned lying flat on her back, crushing down the bed. He was going to ask if she was ill, but then he saw the boy hiding between the bed and the wall, behind all that naked flesh.

This morning the butcher went up to the loft. 'Are you there, lazybones?' he asked.

'Yes,' the apprentice replied.

'Get up. You're coming on the rounds with me.'

The morning street smelled of piss and thyme. There was just a glimpse of daylight and a fresh mountain wind. They took the gig in front of the stable. The apprentice led the pony out. The butcher fixed the harness and buckle.

'You pig!' he growled. 'You pig!' Then he decided to slip the apprentice a look. 'You're a pig.'

'Yes,' the apprentice said.

'Go on, up you get. I'm going to make things tough for you now.' He puckered his grey eyebrows. The apprentice climbed up trembling like a kid goat.

There was a soft morning wind, the sort you sometimes have in July after a scuffling storm. All the ground was

covered with ripe, reddish brown corn looking like butter in the big blue bowl of the hills. The clouds sailed by on the edge of the breeze. It was the kind of day that pushes you outdoors, makes you walk around as though you were on a tight-rope: one of those days that makes a song rise up from the roots of your heart. The view was clear for miles.

Julia went over to the open window to get dressed. Wearing only a blouse and petticoat she watched herself breathing. A bell sounded at Rouquières on the mountain-ledge. Brushed by wind, the round, breathing sky rose and fell like a breast. Julia went down in her bare feet to the kitchen. She shivered with pleasure as she walked across the stone slabs. She made herself a cup of coffee and went to the porch. The groove on her flesh from the petticoat pin made her walk straight, like a tree, like an earthenware jar. Her left hand on her hip, she sipped the coffee with the tips of her lips. Every now and then she rubbed her feet in the grass to damp them with dew. The cold shoots of grass squeezed up between her toes. She was all in blossom.

Madeleine came back from the hen-house with three eggs in each hand.

'The black hen?' Julia asked.

'The black one, and then the grey, and then the one with the red mark on its foot!' Madeleine opened her hand.

Jerome came up and asked: 'What's up?'

'The hen with the red mark's started laying.'

Jerome looked at the eggs in Madeleine's hands. 'I'm going into town for the post,' he said. 'It'll be three weeks tomorrow since we heard from Joseph.'

Madeleine gently placed the eggs at the bottom of the little pot. Julia washed her cup at the sink.

'Do you have any work today?' she asked.

'I thought I'd hang out the washing, the weather's fine.'

'It's also the right weather to start cutting our corn at Soucotte,' Julia said. 'I'm going to start alone.' She pushed her bare feet into heavy shoes and made them comfortable by tapping the heels on the stone slabs. She looked at the scythe, tested the sharpness of the blade with her thumb. She took the ox-horn full of water for the sharpening stone and attached it to her belt. Then she lifted the scythe to her shoulder and set off.

The butcher's gig moved quickly over the ruts of the plain. The wind pushed it, then passed it by and frolicked with the dust ahead, shook the almond trees and ran through the corn. Every now and then Gustave let go of the reins, frowned and turned his head. The apprentice sat stiff and rigid. His small, hairless face was no bigger than a rat's muzzle. He sniffed at the wind. He didn't look at the boss. He looked straight ahead at the road. He had folded his hands into a shell over his knees. He didn't even dare hold on to the cart rails and his head and body bobbed up and down in time with the pony's trot.

There was nothing at the post office. The mail hadn't arrived. Jerome sat down next to the old men on the stone bench. There were three women at the fountain. One of them kneaded a handful of white linen on the stone edge. Another filled her pitcher, while the third waited, hands on hips.

'I've got blue ones for weekdays,' the washerwoman said. She opened her bodice with her wet fingers and showed the blue border of her slip. 'That one's for Sunday. Look at the lace.' She pulled the shoulder-straps out of the suds and laid them on her hand. The fountain water boomed as it filled the pitcher, then the sound grew shrill. Young Amaudric came to give his horse a drink. The animal snorted into the fountain to skim the skin off the water, The soap pinched its nose. It sneezed and shook its head and rump.

'Keep hold of your horse,' the washerwoman shouted. 'Keep hold of it, son of a whore!'

'It's your soap, you dried up old fig!'

The horse calmed down and drank from the bucket. Amaudric and the washerwoman started splashing water at each other.

'Margotte,' she shouted, 'catch hold of him for me!'

The other woman put down her pitcher and grabbed the boy with her arm. She squeezed him against her chest. He started lashing out, so she opened wide her thighs and pincered him between them.

'You've got him now, Margotte. Hold on tight to him. I'm going to wash the snot out of his nose.'

The boy twisted around like a lizard, but the washerwoman daubed his face with the petticoat full of soapsuds.

Julia stood looking over the wide, flat corn-field, spread out like a lake between the hedges of quince trees. Then she stuck the handle of the scythe into the earth and started sharpening the blade with the stone. Her fingers rubbed against the print of Joseph's fingers on the old blue sharpening stone. The stone filled her hand and she felt its weight as she swung across the blade. The wind grew warm as the sun rose higher. Stretched out across the plain, the sun seemed to be asleep. Every now and then Julia flicked the corn with her arms, her fingers, or her hair, and the heavy yellow stalks shook like water. She moved forward into the field, hearing the soil crack softly under the weight of the corn. She knew how to cope with that big leather belt. It was hard and hot, squeezed round her waist like an arm. She kept the ox-horn at the slope of her groin, just where the men fix it.

Bending down, she let her weight fall on the right. Then she swung the scythe gently down on her left side and it sliced through the corn. The wind-rows were lined up now; in perfect order, she'd swear to it. If she lifted up the point of the scythe a little when the cut stalks slipped, they made a lovely pattern as they fell on the level stubble. Joseph couldn't have done it better. With the horn banging against her belly, Julia moved on, back bent and legs apart, swinging from right to left, balancing the big flat blade which skims the soil like a swallow. When she'd reached the middle of the field she heard the rumbling of a cart, then a horse trotting to a halt.

'Hey, you, down there!' somebody shouted.

She held the scythe at the ready and straightened up. She looked round, holding her hand over her eyes. 'Oh, Gustave,' she called, 'I'm coming.' Putting down the scythe, she set off towards him. The sweat dripping down her body grew cold, but the sun soon warmed her, like a mouth breathing close. When she got to the pony she raised her arms to fix her hair. Her black, thick

armpits opened out. The horse turned away its muzzle and shook its ears.

'What about that sow?' Gustave asked.

'She's still down there,' Julia said.

'Is she getting any better?'

'No, she's got it under her belly now.'

'We have to make a decision,' Gustave said. 'It'd be best if we made up our minds at once.'

Hairpins between her lips, Julia was silent for a moment.

'Do you think there's a risk?' she asked.

'There's a risk she'll drop dead one fine day, that's the risk.'

'This is hardly the moment,' Julia said, looking at the haze in the air.

Gustave leaned forward. 'Time's what matters these days,' he said. 'I'll slaughter her and put her in the ice house. Don't worry about the sickness. It's for the soldiers.'

'And the price?' Julia asked.

'I've already told you more than once. I hold to what I say.'

Julia hesitated.

'Don't worry,' Gustave said. He had already taken up the reins and raised the whip.

'Oh, the fact is . . .' Julia said. She put her foot on the step of the gig.

'Ah, yes,' Gustave said. 'Better do it at once. Climb up.' He turned to the apprentice. 'Move over, you,' he said.

The boy was jammed between the boss and Julia. Tightly jammed. The seat was narrow and the woman stout and hard. The jolting of the gig crammed them tighter together. The apprentice still hadn't moved his hands from his knees and he was still as stiff as ever. He didn't dare lean too much against the boss. He squeezed himself against the woman. She was hot as the sun. The greasy sweat seeped through her petticoat and thin slip, gluing him to her.

'Madeleine, he's come for the sow.'

'Oh, I'm off to the Gardettes's farm,' Madeleine said, 'to borrow three loaves of bread. I forgot to tell father when he left.'

'I don't know if Gustave and me'll manage it,' Julia said. 'She's got an evil temper, she must have pains inside.'

Gustave laughed. 'Let her go. We can manage alone. Don't worry. You just have to know how to go about it. She'll cuddle up like a woman.' He winked. His eyes shone as he looked at Julia's bosom, her young shoulders and the fuzzy hairs under her arms.

A cold breath greeted them at the door of the pigsty, a big, vaulted cellar. It was black inside. They had to wait a moment at the entrance to get used to the darkness, the cold, and the sour vinegar-like smell of piss and rotten straw.

'I see her,' Gustave said. 'She's at the end there. Ill go.'

'Careful,' Julia said. 'Don't go empty-handed.'

He took three steps forward, but as he got near the animal, it jumped up so abruptly that the dung-juice shot into the air. Gustave sprang aside. 'Close the door!'

Julia, who was looking on, closed the small door. She laughed because Gustave bumped into the plank and drew back, red in the face, breathing heavily, eyes squinting. The sow banged its snout against the door.

Lips curled up, it twisted its nose, snorted, and tore the wood away with its yellow teeth, munching with both jaws. There was coagulated blood in the depths of its eyes.

'You see,' Julia said, shaking with laughter, 'that's what happens when you're not prepared.'

Gustave got back his breath. He looked at the sow, then at Julia. He chewed his moustache. 'Prepared or not, I'll get her,' she said.

'She'll tear your arm off with those teeth of hers.'

'She'll tear off nothing. Move back.'

'You're behaving like a child, Gustave.'

'Child or not, move back,' Gustave said dryly. 'Get further away. Further away still. I don't need any woman for this. It's a man's work.' And he put his hand on the latch. Julia moved back towards the bales of corn. From there she could reach the grange ladder with one quick leap. All right, let him go ahead.

Gustave drew back the latch. He said one word, then a couple. He was motionless, made no gestures. There was just the trickle that came from his mouth hidden in the rushes of his moustache. He spoke a few more words and the trickle bubbled down his face until he looked like a cat purring to the ashes. He moved neither his arm, or his shoulder, or his head.

Julia held her breath. The sow's snout moved forward, teeth bared. Gustave didn't move; he made his noise. He was confident. He knew. He simply looked at a spider's web. The huge teeth were close to Gustave's leg now, ready to bite, ready to tear off his lowered hand, a small hand with old bones that one bite would wrench away. The sow opened its mouth, then drew back. The man took a step forward. The sow entered the shed. The man followed.

Julia finally breathed out. The performance had dazzled her no less than a streak of lightning. She felt confused, light-headed, and stood there breathing deeply in and out without thinking. Her cheeks burned from the sun. She pressed her damp palms against them. Men! she thought. Men! A man's work. Dominion! She had taken off her reaping belt some time ago, but all the same she could still feel against her lower belly the swinging of that hard ox-horn full of water.

When Madeleine saw them busy at the sties, she quickly fixed her curls with a twist of her fingers and, patting her apron, set off to the Gardettes's farm. From that side of the valley the sight's more beautiful than from the Chauranes's side. It's full of old trees, her father's idea. Sickly old almond trees covered with scabs, a badly wounded cherry tree that's losing its sap to the grass in long red trickles, and then a muddle of wild fig trees, with more birds than figs to it, always bickering. All that suits the Chabrands perfectly. They're good talkers, whistlers, singers, with eyes ever on the alert for a pretty face. They hardly bother about money, but they care a lot for good manners.

'Why, yes, my girl,' Mme Fine said. 'Go to the kneading-trough yourself. Look to the left at the bottom, search around in the bran. No? Then look to the right. There, you see?'

Each time Mme Fine said 'my girl,' Madeleine felt her throat burn as if she'd been drinking brandy. The loaves were there, white and almost tender, under a load of bran.

'Three's enough?' Mme Fine asked.

'Yes! Yes, we only need some until tomorrow. Are you sure you can spare them?'

'Don't worry, my girl.'

Madeleine took the loaves in her arms, holding them as though they were little children. It was good to hear Oliver's mother calling her 'my girl.' And there, against her bosom, that hard, heavy bread felt good, and that smell of bran, straw, and thick crumbs. It was the smell of Oliver at the threshing-floor, standing up in the middle of the treading, crushing donkeys.

'Do you have any news?' Madeleine asked.

'We got a letter four days ago, but it looks very old. He doesn't say anything except we shouldn't worry . . . but we worry all the same!' Oliver looked so much like his mother! Her face is his, it's his. The same handsome trembling eyes, like the little blue flame of a lamp, the lips like red strings, the nose, the globes of the cheeks. It's him. It's his face immersed in this woman's face, as though soaked into milk.

'If you need me,' Madeleine said, 'if you need me Mme Fine, day or night, doesn't matter when, count on me, don't think twice about it, you know that . . . .'

'I know,' Mme Fine said, smiling at the girl standing before her, offering her help so formally. 'I know, my girl.'

On her way back with the loaves, which she carried under her arms like a baby in swaddling-clothes, Madeleine saw a red woollen belt on the bench in the courtyard. She recognized it at once. It was Oliver's. She quickly put the loaves down in the grass and looked around. Nobody. Hiding the belt under her apron, she gathered up the loaves and ran down the slope.

Julia watched the cart leave. The sow, garrotted and gagged with a stump of wood, lay with its head hanging over the edge. The wheel rapped its ears. The cart disappeared round a corner. Julia was going to leave again for the fields when she saw the apprentice running back.

'Has the sow fallen off?' Julia asked.

'No the boss forgot his scarf.'

They went to the shed. The scarf dangled over the high beam of the feeding-trough. Julia, hands on hips, looked at the apprentice. 'Jump!' she said with a laugh.

The youngster jumped and managed to touch the scarf with the tips of his fingers.

'Like a little girl,' Julia said mockingly.

'And you, what are you like?' the apprentice muttered, looking at his feet.

Julia shook with laughter from her handsome bare shoulders downwards. He eyes were coal-black and gleaming. Hands on her hips, her breasts bobbing up and down ready to jump out of her blouse.

'You,' the apprentice said, 'you're like the sow.'

Julia shot out her hand and seized the boy by the arm. She shook him. She laughed. The boy too.

'Say that again,' she challenged him.

'You're like the sow!'

'I'll wrestle you,' Julia said.

'Me too, I'll wrestle you,' the boy said. He tried to get his arms round Julia's waist to throw her off her feet, but she grabbed his shorts with her strong hand, hoisted him up and sent him sprawling into the straw. He dodged, was getting to his feet again when Julia leaped upon him, crushing him with her weight, spreading him out flat on his back. 'There!' she said, 'I've got you, you little milk wrestler,'

She was astride him, a leg on each side. She held him.

she made him feel her weight. Her bare flesh was against the boy's belly. Suddenly she got up and adjusted her blouse. 'That's enough. Get up!' she said abruptly.

Her cheeks and forehead were fiery-red, she looked feverish. The boy stayed in the hay, laughing. 'Get up!' Her voice was dark and threatening. She kicked the boy in the ribs. Her eyes were hard. She was bleeding with shame. She spread her hand out over the opening of her blouse.

The three of them arrived together at the door. Jerome back from the small market-town, Madeleine back from the Gardettes's farm and Julia from the shed.

'There's no letter,' Jerome said.

'Ah,' the women exclaimed together.

The news set each of them thinking for herself. After a while Julia sighed and said: 'So? So why are we standing here like this?'

Noon sounded. The interior of the big farm hall, shut off from the world outside, was fresh with shadow, like a basin kept under earth. There was silence. A bee danced alone in the large flat ray which passed through the crack between the shutters. Every now and then Julia stopped eating. She rested her hands flat on the table edge. Her back was curved and her arms bent, as if she was going to leap towards something. Then she started filling herself with food again, quickly, but her expression remained troubled. She got up while she was chewing the last mouthful. She harnessed herself for reaping as she had in the morning. The big leather belt, the ox-horn, the scythe.

'No siesta?' Madeleine asked.

'No,' Julia said, fastening the buckle of the belt.

'The sun's hot,' Madeleine said, 'it'll be too much for you.'

'Yes,' Julia replied between clenched teeth. She hoisted the scythe on to her shoulder and went out without saying another word. The door that she'd left ajar stayed open to the furnace of the afternoon.

Julia walked in the blazing heat of the road. There was no shadow except for a narrow serrated line under the hedge. The hedge was dead and all its birds asleep. The almond trees did not stir. They creaked, weighed down by the sun's heavy body. She walked on in a rage, kicking herself free from the grass that caught her feet. Her lips were pressed tight together, her gaze fixed on a scrap of the high sky, above the horizon, a free, blue scrap hard as stone and clear as water, with no reflection of the earth. She went on without loosening her lips or lowering her eyes. Hay, already! Smell of hay in the cattle-shed, smell of manure, smell of toiling beasts, sweating, living beasts, smell of herself, smell of her skin, of her hair. It was getting to work on her already, kneading her, shaping her into a paste ready for the yeast. And those noises now! Calls of men from the depths of the field! Those old men! But suddenly she imagined them young. Young men everywhere! There's no way out. No cure. Not even in this work that deadens the nerves. Not even in this heavy, empty weariness of the head. Oh, God, how can you protect yourself? And what would you like to dominate? And what could you master, you, with only a woman's flesh? You can't even knock a boy over into the straw without losing your head. Oh, press your foot on my neck, crush me, weigh your foot down hard on my neck. Anything to stop this turmoil in my body rushing up into my

head! There was a supple roll to Julia's hips as she walked. Her round curves rippled like a wave. She could no longer keep up the fixity of her gaze, the stiffness of her lips or the hardness in her heart. She was soft now and ripe as the peach that shakes under the bee. She reached the beginning of the field. And sure enough it was still between her legs, the warmth and movement of the boy she'd thrown over in the straw. She threw herself forcefully upon the corn and, stretching out her hands, she pounded the earth in uncontrollable rage. The swaths flew away from her. But she was still contorted by desire. It stirred in her guts as though pushing its way out of oil. There's no cure. It's taken possession of her now! It's become the song of all her flesh! This reaper's rhythm, this swinging in the corn, this horn thumping against her belly, this heat burning her neck, this crackling of the flat reddish grass and the flight of the scythe on its only wing. That boy! The warm body full of life twisting under her! Life! Life! And Gustave, what did he do to the sow? And how has he managed, ever since he's been a widower, to have a gaze hot as the sun? There's nothing left except these puny boys with milk bones that split like white cheese if you crush them between your hands. Or these old men. How old can Gustave be? What power does he hide in the glint of those eyes? And in all those big bones and that back of his, broad as a door? She stopped. She wiped her hair and her forehead with the back of her hand, wondering fearfully what would happen to her. She put her hands on hips. Down there, on the road, on the other side of the forest of almond trees, a gig jumped over the ruts. All the horse's bells were ringing. Julia threw aside the scythe. Her gaze was hard again and her lips were squeezed tight together, but she sprang towards the road, finally releasing all that force which had been stored up in her for too long now. She didn't call out but, breathing through wide-open nostrils, she broke into a long run across the grass. Down there the horse went into a gallop. The plain shrugged up a wave of earth. The gig went down the other side. Julia threw herself down on the bank of a slope gasping for breath in pain and exhaustion. The whole sky tottered over her and there was a noise in her ears like the blowing of a big mountain horn.

That evening, Madeleine was the first to go to bed. She was already undressed when Julia passed in the corridor. Madeleine quickly hid something under the sheets. After a moment, the bed in Julia's room creaked. It creaked again, and again, then all the mattress cried out as though somebody was wallowing in it, swimming through to safety. Madeleine ran to the door in her bare feet.

'Julia,' she asked at the door, 'are you ill?'

'No,' Julia said.

Madeleine went back to her room and closed the door securely. She took out what she'd hidden under the sheets. It was the red woollen belt, Oliver's. She looked at it for a long time, touched it, caressed it. She drew up her night-shirt and wound the belt many times around her belly. She laughed silently. It was so hot, so soft, it was so like Oliver.

The forest sang softly in the night. The rain fell, fingered the dead leaves and puddles, then laughed with all its teeth against a piece of sheet-metal.

'Hey, captain', the man said, 'mind the branch.' He tapped the soil with his foot. It sounded hard. 'It's the road,' he said.

The captain was talking in the copse below. He had the voice of a burly man out of breath. 'Come on,' he said, 'you can rest a while. We've found the road.'

He arrived. The man following him kept stumbling over the stones and as soon as he reached the road he lay down in the wet grass and fell asleep. He didn't move. He breathed deeply, his mouth wide open, then he rent the air with the moan of a small lost animal.

'Better leave him for a moment,' the captain said. 'And you, aren't you tired?'

'Yes, I am.'

'What I'd like,' the captain said, 'is an omelette, with lots of eggs and froth all around. Oof!' He breathed through his moustache.

'Yes,' the other man said, 'that'd be fine, and hot, eh!'

'What section you from?' the captain asked.

'The Fourth.'

The captain breathed deeply two or three times. 'How many of you are left?'

'Two. Me and him.'

'Who?'

'Me and the guy who's sleeping. I don't know who he is. The adjutant was killed on relief in the machine-gunners' hole. That's where I jumped and fell down next to you.'

'What's your name?'

'Oliver Chabrand.'

The rain cried out down there in the trees.

'So then, two from the Fourth,' the captain said, 'you and him, and me, that makes three. Twelve from the First, that makes fifteen. Four from the Third, that makes nineteen. Nobody from the Second, still nineteen. If the cyclist managed to pass through the tunnel just after us that'd make twenty. We'd better leave. I'm ready to fall asleep myself.'

Oliver shook the man in the grass.

'Yes, what's up?'

'We're leaving.'

They heard a horse trotting up to them.

'Hey!' the captain shouted. 'Captain Viron of the Fifteenth.'

The horseman approached on foot. Must be an artillery man. 'If you keep on straight ahead,' he said, 'you'll end up in Verdun by the barracks. For Belrupt, turn left when you're out of the wood. Now if you want an omelette while you're on the road, there's a house after the Hundred and Fiftieth's batteries. There are some women there. But you'd better hurry past those batteries.'

The captain led them along the earth track that passed for a road. The man who'd been sleeping tottered after him, with Oliver behind. Sometimes the man almost

collapsed into a hole and Oliver held him up by his cartridge-belt.

'Steady now!'

'Who?' he asked himself each time he touched the man's broad back. 'Who can it be? Regotaz, Vernet, Poiron?'

Then he remembered. They went down into a valley. They heard a stream. The noise of the water in the rushes fell softly on the ear and roused the heart and the blood. Every now and then Oliver passed his hand across his face. 'Me,' he said. He spread his fingers out over his features, on his nose, the bulge of his eyes, his mouth, his neck. He touched his arms and body. 'Me!' He touched his left arm. There was something big as a nut, damp and soft, stuck against the wad of his tunic where the elbow bent. He tore it way and threw it into the mud. He touched his sleeve. It was all sticky.

On the edge of the road there was a passage darker than the night.

'That must be the house,' the captain said. He banged on the door with his feet. The blows echoed inside among the pans and cauldrons. Somebody moved some chairs upstairs, the shutters opened.

'What do you want?' a woman's voice asked.

'Captain Viron of the Fifteenth and two men. We'd like to rest!'

'I'll open up,' the woman said.

An old woman in a night-jacket appeared at the door. She hid the candle behind her hand.

'Come in, and quick now so we're not seen here.'

The air was muggy inside. It smelled of stale breath, washing and the kitchen sink. It smelled of the woman's grey hair and her thick skin. Her hands were lined with plaster from so much washing. The captain stretched out his arms and sighed.

'That's all?' the woman asked, pointing at the two men.

'That's all,' the captain said. 'Now, do you have any eggs?'

'Sure I do.'

'Then you'll make an omelette.'

'Yes,' she said, 'though it's late.'

She had put the candle on the table. Oliver looked at his companion. 'No, it's not Regotaz.'

The candle flame trembled. The other fellow had mud over his face and his big eyes were troubled.

'It's La Poule!'

'Sleep,' La Poule said.

The omelette was served up all fat and thick in the middle of a wide yellow plate. It sizzled on the table. Its steam stifled the candle. La Poule stretched out full length along the floor.

'What's that you got there?' the captain asked.

Oliver looked at his left sleeve.

'That's blood,' the captain said. 'You're wounded?'

'No,' Oliver said, 'It's Marroi. Down there in the tunnel, half his head was blown off. It spattered all over me.'

'Do me a favour, take it off.' The captain lowered his moustache into the omelette and sniffed.

'Put the box in front of the candle,' the woman said, 'or they'll be seeing the light through the crack in the shutters. Make it dark all around.'

The captain winked. 'Do you have a little brandy?' he asked.

'Some plum brandy if you like.'

'Let's have it.'

She brought him an earthenware jar. 'If you drink all of that my man . . .' Her feet were bare. The cold stone slabs made her hop slowly from one foot to the other. 'You don't need anything more? I'm off to sleep. There's my daughter, she'll be getting cold all alone. Help yourselves.'

Leaning back in his chair, Oliver belched loudly. A smell of butter and baked grass filled his mouth. He felt good and solid now, at the peak of life. The captain had stretched his legs out under the table. 'A little brandy?' he said.

'No. I'd rather not,' Oliver said. He waggled his tongue round that green taste of the grass. It filled his head. 'Sleep,' he said.

'Chabrand!' the captain said, 'it's good to be young, my lad. You don't know how lucky you are. Go to sleep, you sot!' He smiled gently as he watched Oliver pick up his coat. The left side was heavy and the sleeve had turned stiff. Oliver stretched out on the floor, his back against La Poule's. He felt the other breathing there close to him.

Regotaz! he thought. And the others! He carefully pushed away the stiffened sleeve of the greatcoat. He stayed awake. The captain remained at the table. The candle was low. The box, the bottle, the flask, the back of a chair gave off long, flickering shadows. The captain was talking. Painfully he lifted up his right arm that was hanging by his side. 'Two from the Fourth, and me, that makes three, colonel, twenty all together. All the company is present, colonel.' He waved his arm, heavy with weariness and alcohol, at the empty room and the long shadows.

## *News from Joseph*

Where could she hide, where could she hide? Wherever she ran, things rose up against her. Her feet no longer recognized the threshing-floor, or the courtyard, or path that led to the fountain, nor that fragment of meadow, nothing. Everything capsized around her. She stumbled against the stones and her skirt got tangled in her legs. Where could she hide herself?

She couldn't bear to see old Jerome as he looked at his hand; nor the sight of his earthy face furrowed by old age and ancient sorrows, his old man's mossy, earthy face all wet with big white tears; those trembling lips, that fallen chin which he couldn't lift to close his jaws, and the saliva and tears, and the moaning of a man at the end of his days. If that was all! But no. Through his tears he stared at his big right hand. It was deformed.

No. She had buried her head in her apron and wept with him, but suddenly she could stand it no more. Go away? No. Hide herself, get into some little corner like an animal, writhe on the ground, roll up into a hole in the earth and stay there. Stay there, huddled up, with her flesh, her tears, her sorrow.

Julia pushed open the stable door. The old horse turned its head and looked at the woman. It wasn't feeding time.

'Move over,' Julia said.

She slid against the horse, went to the back of the stable and lay down in the straw under the trough, in the warmth, reassured by the horse's shadow, comforted by its smell and heat. The horse jangled its chain and gently tapped its hoof in the straw. So, just like that, they'd cut off Joseph's arm! His right one. It's done. There's nothing more to do, that's how it is. She'd got the news in a letter. The arm! The hand and all. They cut off his arm! Is it possible? How did they do it? Why did they do it? He must have suffered! Oh, Joseph, my poor love! And now there's nothing more on your right side? No more arm? That explained the long silence. That was why they hadn't heard from him for over three weeks. It was as though he'd been rubbed out with an eraser. No more Joseph! Lost in the wind. And that was when they'd cut off his arm. Where? At the elbow? Is there a stump or has it all been levelled off? Oh, my poor love!

'Oh, Bijou,' Julia called to the horse. The old horse lowered its head towards her and sniffed her, spraying its heavy breath over her through the two jets of its nostrils. 'You, you're happy!'

The horse's large, kind eyes were green and red. It had spent all its life looking down at the earth and up at the trees. Its eyes were brimming with sweet and ancient things.

She had been happy too. There was the dance-hall down in the village, which they used to decorate every Sunday with box-tree and oak branches. And Jerome came down from the hills with his accordion on a shoulder-strap, and young Mercier came down also with his brightly polished cornet. From one o'clock onwards the benches used to be packed with girls. But Julia went to stand behind the houses, at the edge of the apple trees from where you could see the road. She watched Madeleine arriving in her blue dress, her face red from the bright sun, but there was always a lovely blue air about her from the reflection in her eyes. 'He's coming,' Julia used to say. 'He's put on that handsome hat.' Then she ran across the orchard towards the hall. She just had time to sit down with the others, on the edge of the bench near the door, when he appeared, Joseph, standing in the doorway, almost filling it with his broad shoulders, and his big black hat tilted to the left of his head. The horse rubbed its forehead against Julia's shoulders.

'Oh, Bijou, yes, my beauty!'

She had loved Joseph at once with the whole of herself, without holding anything back. She was smitten by him, by the way he swung his shoulders when he walked, by his solidity, the health glowing in his reddish-brown eyes. Jerome played the accordion, young Mercier said: 'One, two,' then put his cornet to his mouth. And Joseph took her in his big arms.

'Oh, my love, my poor love!'

His arm! They've cut off that arm. The one he put around me. Warm and firm around me when we waltzed! That was the hand that he touched me with the first time, there, on the cheeks, on the eyes, on the mouth. We were in the hay-shed at seven o'clock. We looked up through the sky-light at the night, violet like a plum. The smell of crushed hay when we sat down! And all that happiness made me giddy as we nestled together and we were drunk with joy that ran through our bodies to our finger-tips. That was the hand he touched me with the first time. On my cheek. He

touched the round of my cheek. Then my mouth and eyes. That was the hand he knew me with afterwards . . . .

'Oh, Joseph, oh, my poor love!'

And now there's only half of you left. You won't be touching me any longer with that hand, will you? It was a clever hand, darting around like a little animal, hot and hard, and no stranger to any part of me. Never again, will you? Why? Tell me. I haven't had that hand for very long. So, you'll have to learn to touch me with the other hand, wont you?

She was sitting in the straw. The old horse lowered its head again, stuck out its tongue and tried to lick Julia's cheek, but the bridle was too short.

'Julia!' a man's voice called. It was Jerome.

'Yes,' Julia said. She came out from under the trough.

'I was looking for you. I was afraid. I saw you running away so wildly. Be reasonable, try to . . . .'

They stood and faced each in silence. Tears streamed down their faces.

'Oh,' Jerome cried out, lifting up his arms, 'the right hand has gone from the plough. Oh, my son!'

## *The Captain*

The captain stayed in his room in the hut. You could see him through the dirty window-panes, tunic off, braces loose, shirt-sleeves rolled up to display his hefty arms. He sat near the table with his braces undone. He no longer bothered with his puttees or his shoes. La Poule had bought him some slippers. His riding breeches were unbuttoned. The cloth gaped open on his calfs which were dense with hairs.

The Sixth company was encamped in a thick expanse of sweet forest. Leaves rustled, water bubbled, but you could hear the muffled bark of cannons at the horizon. They stretched out their long necks between the trees.

The captain opened the window. 'Camembert!' he shouted.

At the other side of the clearing, La Poule, who had been sitting at the entrance of the grange, stood up, searched in his haversack, then crossed the thicket with his box of cheese. At other times the captain whistled. La Poule fetched his bicycle, and sped off down the track towards the village. On these occasions he didn't return to the grange at night.

Oliver stayed alone. The reinforcements hadn't reached them yet. He stuck his candle on his gas mask-case. The straw around him was like levelled earth. He tried to find warmth and forgetfulness in the flow of his

blood. He put out the light. Marroi, Doche, Regotaz, the young corporal with the cheeks of a little girl, and the fellow who made kiss-curls in the middle of his forehead. The straw was littered around him like shadows. He heard Marroi snoring. Doche talked in his sleep and waved his arms around as though he was threshing corn. Oliver kept awake. The walls of the grange groaned as though hit by a load of felt. The howitzer at Belrupt was firing, plaster fell from the ceiling. Oliver turned his head and pressed his right cheek into the straw. Times were difficult. A sly frost gripped the bushes. Bare branches cracked.

'Regotaz,' said Oliver, in a soft, deep voice. He saw him again leaning on the small speckled birch-tree. He saw him touching the green wounds of the tree with his kindly, purposeful fingers. Empty and alone now, the forest moaned under the weight of moon and frost.

A shadow appeared at the entrance. 'Are you there, Chabrand?' La Poule asked.

'Yes,' Oliver said. He had blown out the candle.

'Where?'

'Lying down. Move forward carefully. I'm here.'

La Poule crouched down beside him. 'I can't look after the old man any longer,' he said. 'You ought to come. Perhaps you can help. You're so calm.'

La Poule wiped his boots on the scraper in front of the hut. 'You go in first,' he said.

There was light from the fire in the chimney. The captain was standing in the middle of the room, his stout legs wide apart. He rocked backwards and forwards, as though beaten by the wind. His shadow swayed in front of him. 'Answer, you wretch!' the captain shouted at his shadow. It moved back, then it sprang towards him like a beast of prey. He steadied himself by banging his big fist on the table corner. 'You wretch!'

'Captain,' Oliver said in his young voice.

The captain turned his wild boar's body round slowly. He glanced over his shoulder. 'Oh, it's you, little lad, you're here.' He held out his enormous, velvety hand. It was stretched wide open by tense, excited nerves. Oliver put his own hand inside it.

'Little lad, little lad,' the captain said, 'look at me, my boy. I like it when you look at me. Let me see your eyes. You know how to sleep, you do, Chabrand. Sleep. sweet slob! You've got sheep's eyes. Look at me. Tell me, little lad, what can we do with what's left to us? What do we have time to do with it when we can't sleep?' Every so often he jumped and looked behind his back at that wretched shadow. 'With the life that's left to us, Chabrand, you who sleep, I order you . . . .'

'Captain,' Oliver said, 'you should go to sleep.' He drew him over to the iron bed. 'Sit down.'

The captain sat on the bed. Oliver took off his slippers. The captain undid his breeches and lifted up his legs one after the other. Oliver pulled off the breeches, then he gently pushed the captain flat upon the bed. La Poule came in, slipping on his damp feet. He had his shoes off. Stooping, he went over to the cupboard in the dark corner. He opened it quietly and took out a bottle.

'Little lad,' the captain said, 'turn round, let me see the white of your eyes. Let me see the whole of your face. Let me see your cheeks, the meat on the bone. You should only look at blood through the skin. Then it's a beautiful sight. There's a place for blood. I hear it at the end of your arm. Let me look at you living!' He

fixed his gaze on Oliver. His strong hand grasped Oliver's wrist. 'They're all the same,' he said gently. 'There's more blood than there is salt between the fingers.' He tried to sit up. 'But what do we have the right to do with what's left to us? The right, you understand, little lad, the right? With what's left to us of life . . . .'

La Poule whistled in the corner, then he pointed at the door.

'Wait,' Oliver whispered. 'The right?' he asked.

The captain was sleeping. He writhed on the bed as though trying to break loose from chains. 'Yes,' he breathed, 'the right.' His mouth stayed open on the word. His arm fell back again. He began snoring.

'You should cover the fire,' Oliver said to La Poule.

They left on tiptoe.

'What was all that stuff about the right?' La Poule asked when they were outside.

Oliver didn't reply. He had the whole night ahead of him in the deserted grange, with Regotaz and the others, bleeding and expressionless, stretched out beneath the straw. But there'd also be the rustling velvet of all the trees, the hum of all the stars, and the sound of frost varnishing the grass clearing. La Poule took a bottle from under his greatcoat. 'Saint James. There's a fine brand for you! Give me your flask.'

The reinforcements arrived. The corporal had a new notebook, a sheet of paper, a blotting-pad, and a finely sharpened pencil shaped into a cone. 'What's your name?' he asked Oliver. 'And you,' he said to La Poule, 'you're from the infantry section?'

The young sub-lieutenant wore moulded leggings with handsome, well-rounded artificial puttees. 'Tell me where your captain's quarters are,' he said. He toyed with a silver whistle swinging from his index finger on a silk cord. They walked over the flattened litter of straw and installed themselves on the spots where Doche and Marroi slept. Their brand new squeaking boots crushed the shadows. They called out to each other as they assembled.

They wore new greatcoats, new leathers, and flat cartridge-pouches like three little leather satchels around their waists. Their partly undone sacks, thrown to the ground, were covered with shining straps. The cloth was a handsome sky-blue, the fluff shook. Their faces were kneaded with the peaceful things of life. It was all written, all marked in their eyes, on their flesh, in the crease of their mouths, in the hairs of their beards and on the thread of moustache which they polished with the hook of their fingers. You could sense everything they'd left behind on the other side of the hills. All the health, all the force of life. The big fat elder sister who goes to fetch the lard at the store-house. The mother who pushes her grey hair back behind her ear. The little girl in her apron singing on her way to school. The wife stretched out flat in bed, like a spring of clear water in the grass. It made you deeply bitter to see all that in their faces. Their guns were new. You could hear the lorries rumbling up behind them with cartridges.

The wind sprang shrieking over the Alps, stopped astonished for a moment at the white crests of the hills in front and the green flat earth below; snorted for a moment, reared up in the sky, then hurled itself forward.

At each shock, the farm huddled up into its shell of stones and tiles. The sickles fell from their hooks in the grange. The almond trees moaned freely from the depths of their trunks. The pine-tree roots growled and bit into the rocks. On the road a woman fought to hold down her skirts, waving her arms as if to repulse an attacker. Bent double a man forced his way against the wind, pushing forward his thighs. A hunting-dog came up to the edge of the meadows. It stuck its muzzle into the wind, sniffed, closed its eyes, flattened its ears and shook its head. The smells of all the beasts of the hills streamed off it. Perfumes of blood and sap: wild boars, doe-hares, partridges, quails, big snakes, lizards, fennels, hyssops, bees, grasshoppers. Their smells flowed down its flanks. All that life surged up its nostrils like the foam of a stream.

Oliver sat on the stone bench at the front of the Gardettes's house. He pushed his thin, soil-smeared face into the wind. Dazed, he sniffed in the long shreds of air. His mother came to see him twice. She passed her hand over his head and said . . . It wasn't too clear what she said, or even if she said exactly what she meant to say, because she too was drinking up the wind of life. She looked at the dirt on Oliver's cheeks. 'You're not cold?' she asked.

'No,' Oliver replied.

For the three days that he'd been back he'd sought to do nothing but plunge his head into life, as into a trough where one can gorge for ever. Yesterday he watched a tiny lizard near the roll of corn. Only recently emerged from the egg, it was already quite green, with little shining drops of water at the tips of all its scales. The lizard feasted on the sun. It sought out the violets beneath the grass, where it's warm and black. And then in this darkness it found the illuminated black of the flower.

The wind, quickly, the sun, quickly, and this big mass of bright greenery tossing around like water thrown from a bucket. The taste of thyme, quickly. As soon as it touches the nostrils it shoots up into the head like an arrow. And quickly now this huge pure sky. The wind has torn away the leaves and scattered them among the oats.

Oliver was immersed in this flow of life, his breath almost crushed out of him. Smells streamed through the pores of his skin the way they used to. Old sounds found their way to him again and pierced his heart. Life! Quickly, life!

'Papa . . .' He went over to his father who was weaving new wicker into the bottom of a grape-basket. 'Papa, there are policemen down below.'

'It's for one of the Bras,' the father said. He finished the wicker knot that he'd started. 'One of the Bras has played truant. He came on leave. He spent all his time

looking around and playing hopscotch with the school-kids. Then he took his hunting-gun and said, "This is the kind of weapon I'm used to." He left for Hubacs. He deserted.'

Oliver chewed the twig of a fig tree, one of his child-hood passions. He had found again the old motions of his infant hands. He chewed the milky stalk and sudden-ly life seemed full of promise, infinite. He forgot. He clenched that scrap of wood between his teeth. It was young and swollen with milk. He sucked the bitter sap.

'Have you done the dishes already?' Julia asked.

'Yes.' Madeleine blushed and looked down at her work-basket.

'And the pig hash?'

Madeleine lifted her head. The blood had mounted to her face and concentrated in her cheeks. Her ex-pression was sweet. All the housework was already done. The farm was clean and polished. The flagstones were washed, the chairs lined up against the walls. There wasn't a speck of dust on the table.

'You're well ahead,' Julia said. She moved away, her hips swaying. As she closed the door, she glanced shyly at Madeleine. Madeleine looked down at her work-basket.

The thick shutters in Julia's room were closed and locked. They kept the room in shadow. You could hear the bees outside buzzing against the crack in the shutters. The wind hit the walls with the flat of its hand. Julia stood in the shadow, in the fresh air, in the smell of grapes and apricots drying in the reed trays. Always alone! Alone with these soft fruits and these noises. Alone with life. She passed her tongue over her lips. They were burning. She had always known this storm in the blood. But Joseph had been there with his bare arms, his chest covered with fur like the back of a ram. The mark of his feet, the imprints from the nails of his boots, they were all around. She heard a door open softly below. Julia pushed open the shutter and looked out. It was Madeleine. She had left yesterday at the same hour. She walked, swaying in the wind, her face ecstatic. The earth commands.

Like a plaster Jesus. He's like a plaster Jesus. Oliver! Oliver! Madeleine ran through the vineyards. The lone, bare sky sliced heavily into the horizon of the hills. Nothing on the plain except the wind. The trees jumped around their shadows like tethered goats. She knew from the colour of the day that he was already below waiting for her on the slope of genista, in the grass beds of the earth, straining for her with all his manly limbs. Her breath had already been shortened by this wind and by her desire, and by the mounting need to obey this desire. The first time that he was back, it was six o'clock of a red, autumn evening that announced the start of the wind. And he whistled. He whistled and she set off run-ning towards him, the tea-cloth still in her hands.

'Oliver, my love, my beauty! It's been so long! I'm nearly dead from staying alone, thinking of you!' He had crushed her in his arms and moaned softly . He's like a plaster Jesus. Oh. what she had to give. But she gave everything willingly, with overwhelming consent, with the great joy of giving all she had to the one she loved. Obey! She never wanted to see again what she had to see at that first meeting. Oliver shaking like a broken horse, Oliver overcome by hunger and thirst, broken by the force of death and battle. She was the

bread. Eat me! She gave herself to his teeth, her lips hot and her body open. She was the bread, the thin crumb and the heavy crust. To mix herself with him, to join herself to him with all her body, to soothe him, to nourish him, to make him suckle at her young flesh, to give him the milk of peace and joy, to give herself, for she was bread to that great hunger of man and misery. When she thought about it during the day, her face flamed. But the colour of the hour and the moment had come again. He was down there in the grass bed. He was waiting for her to stretch out against him.

Yesterday she had gone to see his mother. The first night he jumped around in bed like a little devil. I went to comfort him. He didn't hear, he breathed between clenched teeth, he nearly knocked the lamp out of my hands. Now he's docile as a little lamb when he sleeps. He makes no more noise than a plaster Jesus. Madeleine ran through the vineyard without looking behind, holding down her billowing skirts with her hand.

'I've got too much blood,' Julia said. And with this thought in her head, she forced herself to do the heavy work. And afterwards she even sought to tame her flesh by making herself more weary. She gathered grapes all through the day in the strong wind until she was dazed and her legs were aching.

'The wind's made me drunk as a sailor,' she said. She started smiling, but suddenly she felt her blood writhe within her like an imprisoned snake. 'I've forgotten my bill-hook,' she said.

And she went out, striding over the plain, through the almond trees, down the slope, and skirted the small En-chau hill. In the evening she found herself in cold Ubac. She walked in the wild boars' lair and suddenly something rose up from nearly under her feet. It leaped at her like a big black beast. Stopped and turned round. It was a man, drawn up into himself like a vicious dog, looking as though he wanted to tear everything to shreds with his teeth. He lifted up his gun, groped around the breech, then remembered that it wasn't a fighting-gun and put his finger to the trigger. At that moment he must have seen that he was confronted by a woman who was all alone. He stood still and looked at her. His big left hand held the belly of the gun. And Julia saw the man. She was overcome by weakness and nausea. She looked at the grass. It was still green.

'That must be one from the Bras family,' she said to herself.

He made a move towards her. She couldn't tell which one it was because he had so much hair all over him. Even when she looked underneath the hair, saw his eyes, she couldn't recognize him.

Who can it be? I know them all. Who? Fauque? Clodomir?

'Is that you, Julia?' the man said.

'It's me,' she said. 'And you, who are you?'

'Toine,' the man said.

'Toine? Jesus God! It's you?'

He was the one who could waltz in any direction with his eyes closed, who could spin his feet round like a plate. He was so gentle that they called him Toinette.

'It's me,' the man said, and he lowered his gun. He took another step forward, supple and muscular on his feet like an animal. 'Did you see the police?'

'Don't be afraid, they're down there near Rousset. I

saw them.' She looked at his face. It was lit up now by memories of old times. The dance in the garland of leaves, the waffle-seller, the accordion, the musician who always beat time on the floor. But there were new things in his face. Hunger, thirst, and the appetite of the flesh.

'Toinette,' Julia said to herself.

Hard and pitiless things.

'If you need some bread,' she said, 'some salt, some wine . . . .'

'No.'

She moved back a step. 'If you need . . . .'

She didn't know. Did he jump or roll over her like a big stone? Or perhaps . . . She didn't know. She felt the force of an arm around her waist and a hot swelling that crushed her breasts. She was thrown backwards in a deluge of wind, trees, and man. She had waited long enough. She was the first to bite into Toine's lips and welcome him with a long moan.

At Buissonnades they had been gathering grapes all the day. The vineyard on the low plain had been cleared. They loaded the baskets on to the cart and then Felicity sat down on the wooden seat, placed young Paul between her legs and set off along the uneven roads. The prisoner led the horse by the bridle. The horse was nervy after a day of wind and had forgotten what shadows were. At each one it jumped between the shafts as if it was being burned. Luckily there was a man's firm hand to guide it. The man wore a small forage cap and a green jacket. Two large letters were marked in white on his jacket: P.W. Felicity looked at his wrist with the bridle round it. It was solid and knew its job. The major had said: 'You, you're a war widow, you have the right to a prisoner.' When the cart bobbed too much like a boat, the prisoner turned his head and looked at the mistress. He had a slight, questioning smile.

'Yes,' Felicity said, 'that's fine.'

Young Paul was all sticky from the juice of the grapes. He plucked off the grapes in the hollow of his hand and shoved them all into his mouth. If the cart jumped he crushed the pips on his cheeks. Then he pushed out his tongue and licked the juice.

They reached Buissonnades at night. They brought in the baskets of grapes. It was too late to start cooking so they divided a goat cheese into three and, seated on the bench in front of the house, they ate in silence. Felicity, body bent, arms hanging by her sides, made no movement as she ate except with her wrist to break the chunk of bread and lift it to her mouth.

Afterwards Paul rubbed the stiffness from his legs and drew near to the man. 'I'll tickle you,' Paul said.

The man pretended to be afraid. 'Help! Help!' Then he caught the youngster's arm and gave him a good tickling with all his fingers. It was a fine night. The wind had just fallen abruptly. The sky was grey with stars. Felicity got up.

'Say goodnight, Paul.'

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight,' Felicity said, taking Paul by the hand.

The man got up. They heard his footsteps rustle through the grass. Felicity lit the candle in the kitchen. You could see her face in its light, her hair, and a corner of the kitchen. A saucepan on a hook, the coffee-pot on the chimney-piece, a piece of box-wood in memory of Arthur on the wall.

The prisoner sighed sadly, deeply. He went the rounds

of the farm. The horse was tied up securely. The goats had everything they needed. All the chickens were inside. There was no smell of burning. He lay there for a moment on the alert before he turned on his side and fell asleep.

When she was sure she couldn't be seen, Julia went to the cupboard and poured out a little oil in the hollow of her hand.

'Goodnight,' she said.

And she climbed the stairs. She carried the oil close to her, taking care not to spill any. When she reached her room, she listened, then she opened the door and oiled the hinges. She dipped her finger into the hollow of her hand and she pressed it over the hinges, leaning with all her weight to make the oil penetrate the joints. Eventually, she moved the door backwards and forwards in the darkness. It made no more noise than a cat's tread.

# *Santerre*

'He'll get us as he wants to,' Jolivet said.

La Poule stopped spitting into the rain puddles. He had spat a long way down the road. Even if he forced himself he couldn't spit any further. He turned towards the inside of the grange. 'Who?' he asked. 'Who'll get us?'

They had already been in the middle of winding, twisting Santerre for days on end. It was like being lost at sea. Everything had been rubbed out: the pain of Verdun, the death of old comrades, and that taste of Madeleine in a little handkerchief stained with two drops of lavender essence.

'The chaplain,' Jolivet said, 'the colonel's chaplain.' As things stand now, old fellow, I'm telling you, the good Lord doesn't have to be friendly any longer. Let him come when he likes, show himself as he is, he's sure to have us all the same.'

The wreck of a village floated on the long waves of the earth. As soon as it was evening, all the lights were turned off. Fortunately there was the heavy smell of men in the granges then. The days were unbearably long. The sky was the colour of flour, the air was stifling. Words didn't spring, they trickled out of the mouth like saliva. You saw the wagons passing along the track,

but you didn't hear them. You saw them pass over the crests of the small bare hills. Horses lifted their hooves out of the smoke. Lorries dipped in the undulations of the ground like the debris of bark on the waves of the water. The noises didn't dare go away, they stayed close to the men, to the beasts, to the wood of the wheels, they didn't dare go into the sky.

La Poule gathered a lovely gob of spit between his cheeks and tried to shoot it even further down the road.

The village was immersed in silence. There was a cold nip in the marrow of the air. The men lit fires with planks in the courtyards, but they wouldn't blaze. Giving off no flames and hardly any heat, the wood seemed to paint itself red, then it crumbled away into dead cinders. The men gathered round, stretched out their hands and knees, joined themselves together like chimney bricks. This reassured the fire a little and sometimes a flame shot up.

A pungent smell worried them too. It forced itself upon them, tasting like rotten meat. It rushed up into their heads. Then it went away and they sniffed with pleasure the sky's taste of stale flour.

Dark, muffled sounds came up sometimes from this street full of mud and rain. It was a movement of the air that you wouldn't even have felt on a damp hand. It came from the sick grange which it was forbidden to enter. In the middle of the wide doorway a post was sticking up. An inscription nailed upon it read "Snot" in charcoal. The shining carcase of wood was full of holes, it was shining down there. Scraps of walls rotted in the bare soil.

The former inhabitants had abandoned an enclosure for horses at the side of a kind of long reddish dune. It was a big rectangle of open shelters made with tree trunks whose bark had been scraped off. There were still about ten horses around and two men. The horses were all divided up along the enclosure. One here, another there, another further off, and so on all the way round. The two men were separated also. They never came down to the village. You could see them moving up and down. When they got too near to one another, one stopped, the other made a wide detour around him and went away to his own business. They wore big white gloves. Sometimes they pulled white hoods down over their heads. There were holes for their eyes. They lifted up their glass demi-johns, emptied liquids into the buckets, stirred this mixture with sticks, then went to pour it in bucketfuls over the rumps of the horses. A slow smell of ether and carbolic acid seeped through the dune. Night fell. Then the horses called out to each other. They sensed the night coming when it was still far away, pressed into the grey east. Their trembling voices were uncertain, unclear. You could hear the nerves and chests straining. Their voices seemed to come from the pain in their blood. All the same there was a bird-like quality to these voices as they hovered across the night and each horse told what he had to tell. During the day the horses stayed with their noses against the planks. One that was white and could be seen from far off paced over the same spot without stopping and without getting tired. It was the first to die. The two men dug the grave, always separated, each digging from one end.

There was a story going around the second artillery section which made the men grow wary of empty

granges. Reyne had come back from leave. He arrived just as dawn was breaking and walked all the way from the train to the village. Drunk with fatigue, with the night and with brandy, he took shelter in the grange. Two days later he joined the other men. His eyes were wide open with astonishment, they looked up questioningly into the depths of the grey sky. He lifted his heavy hands up to his shirt-collar and slowly tore it away to free his neck. He did nothing but gape with astonishment, unable to speak. They handed him over to two male nurses who had to tie him up from his shoulders to his feet because he struggled so much. They put him in a cart and took him away. One of the nurses was well known to the men. He played a small flute and then, pinching his nose, he imitated the violin and played extracts from *Tosca*. Both nurses came back in the evening.

'So?' the men asked.

'So, here we are,' they said.

The next day the one who played the flute went off alone near the dune where the horses were. During the day the captain asked La Poule if he'd seen his revolver. 'It was hung up there,' he said.

'Me? No,' La Poule said.

The cyclist didn't follow the track which was knee-deep in mud. He passed across the fields where the grass was springy.

'I found a dead man,' he said when he got back.

It was the nurse. He had shot himself through the head. He was lying on his right arm, his face hidden in the bend of his elbow. The revolver was full of blood. The captain came and wiped the revolver with his handkerchief. In the evening he made La Poule dismantle and oil it. 'Put some grease in the groove,' he said, 'that's where it always jams.' He tested the empty gun. The cylinder turned, the hammer clicked, it was all right. He put the revolver back in the holster and hung the holster at the head of his bed.

The cyclist arrived with news. 'They're coming up in line,' he said.

During the day, the liaison agents left to spy out the positions. They were given a cold meal and a flask of wine. The lines were far from the village. The men went unarmed, but carried walking-sticks. They returned at dawn the following day. The captain was waiting for them at the door. His tunic and his belt were buttoned up tight and he had made himself handsome in his new fashion. He no longer shaved; instead, he had found another more practical system. He used scissors to cut his hairs down level with his skin. This gave him a bear's head. He had grown even fatter and filled the doorway now.

It was already dawn when Jouras came back from the first guard. Oliver heard him walk along that zigzag of the Fraternity which was just in front of the entrance to the trench.

'They're sleeping,' he said, 'come in.'

They were just on the edge of sleep, listening to the strange underground sounds, earth-draughts passing through the trench like a wind.

'So?' Oliver asked.

'It's calm,' Jouras said. 'Calm. Calm,' he repeated, pouring out a drink.

'Did you see everything?' Camous asked.

'Don't be funny,' Jouras said, 'I only saw the surroundings, that was enough for me. I'm telling you

what I saw and what I understood. It looks as though it's going to be a real shit-hole, you'll see.'

The day was unbearably long. White and sagging, the sky grew old above the earth. They got used to raising their heads above the trench. There was no risk. They saw nothing except twisting Santerre and the country-side, mouldy with mist in the hollows. They heard nothing except for the distant rolling of the provision wagons at pre-ordained hours. A crow would fly by at noon, the most stifling hour of the day. It was always the same crow.

'And what about me?' Jolivet said when La Poule put down the soup pan.

'There's only one letter,' La Poule said, 'it's for Chabrand.'

'And what about me,' Jolivet said. 'I tell you I'm waiting for one. It's already . . . .'

'Stop breaking my balls,' La Poule said. 'If there'd been one, I'd have given to it you. That one's for Chabrand.'

'Let's see,' Joulivet said.

'You arsehole,' La Poule said softly.

He took the letter out of his jacket pocket. Jolivet held it for a moment at arm's length, without looking at it, then he read the address.

'Oliver Chabrand . . . yes,' he said.

There was always this soft silence in the afternoon and the sound of a drop of water falling on the steps through a crack in the logs.

'Hey,' Jolivet called in a low voice.

Oliver turned his head.

'Did you get a letter?'

'Yes.'

Jolivet moved over towards Oliver without looking at him. He was watching the men playing cards near the candle. 'Lend it to me for a moment,' he said. 'I wont poke my nose into your affairs. I'll just read the words of greeting.'

Oliver put his hand into his pocket. Jolivet stopped him. 'No, it doesn't matter. Keep it to yourself. She'll write one day, the slut, she'll write to me!' And he went to sit down at the top of the steps against the cold slab of the white day.

The liaison agent went out every day, turning right towards the Seventh. Then they heard the noise of his gas mask-case knocking against the logs. He had come back. 'Come and take a look,' he called one evening.

They had to walk the length of the Zouaves' trench, and follow the blue zigzagging across the quarry. The ramp had just been wrecked. Scraps of cloth were mixed with the mud. A kind of air-hole had opened as a result in the side of the quarry. A man's arm stuck out from it. The hand was black and shaped like a hook. They drew near. There was a big ditch full of corpses; a sound of chopping water came from inside.

During the night there was always somebody who quietly left the guard to come to the entrance of the trench. He listened to the breathing, the snoring, the occasional cries of a sleeping soldier. It was like coming in from the cold to warm yourself at the fire. In the trench it was more often anxiety than sleep that swelled up in the bodies like a sickness.

'Listen!' said Jouras who was sleeping at the end.

It was the middle of the night. They could hear the mist above rubbing against the earth.

'Listen!'

There was a slight, regular, needle-sharp noise in the trench.

'You hear it?'

'Yes.'

It was a deliberate, purposeful noise. It wasn't loud, but it filled the whole of the trench.

'It's here inside!'

'The candle!'

'Charles, the candle!'

'Move over!'

'The lighter!'

'Your lighter! Your lighter!'

He rubbed his lighter, there was a little flame. The edges of the light picked out the motionless faces of the men. They listened. Even their eyes were still. The noise was right there in the middle of them.

'Light the candle!'

La Poule lit the candle. The flame didn't rise straight, but shook like a leaf. He looked around him. 'Ah,' he said, 'it's the watch.'

The watch was hanging from a nail on a plank. The man who came to warm himself at the entrance usually took it away for guard duty. The next day they told him not to forget it.

'No,' he said, 'I'd rather leave it. The cold chokes it.'

After a moment, Jouras got up, unhooked the watch and put it on the ground. That way it made less noise. It was only a question of attention. Even when Camous took the watch away they still heard the ticking.

'And my watch?' Camous asked one evening.

He had looked at the nail and thought things over. Everybody in the trench pretended to be asleep.

'If I lay my hands on the guy who . . .' he said. He lay down and turned his back on them all. Jouras had his eyes open. He took his hand out of the blanket and scratched his beard. He looked at the nail.

Towards the end of that night, the liaison agent arrived out of breath. He roughly shook awake anyone whom he could lay hands on in the darkness. 'Hey there! Get up!' He lit his lighter. 'No, wait,' he said. 'Where's your candle?'

He tried to control his Adam's apple, but it kept bobbing up.

'What is it, old fellow?'

At last he managed to spit. 'Listen,' he said to La Poule, 'I'm not mad, but . . . .'

A machine gun rattled slowly outside.

'. . . I saw him,' the man said, 'I'll lay my skin on it. Listen, I'm telling you, he was there, I saw him, I've got eyes. You're not going to tell me he walked out of the hole. I've just passed by there. I've come from the Seventh. I went up to the corner. I could already see the trench. He was there. So clear that I told myself, It's probably the captain perhaps. And I said quietly: "Captain!" He didn't reply. And then I saw that he was thinner than the captain. His coat made him look fat. I could see the coat clearly, it was like a hunting-jacket. So, you see, I'm not imagining things.'

'I've already seen him once myself,' La Poule said. 'We should block the door. We'll put up a tent canvas. It's a *Feldwebel*. No not one of our men, that's what's so bad.'

'Yes,' Jouras said, 'it's true, it's a *Feldwebel,* I saw him too, the other night. I said nothing. He passed by. I hid in a corner and struck him across the mug with my gun-butt.'

'No!' La Poule said.

'Yes,' Jouras said.

'And so?'

'So, nothing.'

Camous arrived with the debris of the watch in his hand.

'If I ever get my hands on the shit who did that, I swear there'll be hell to pay.'

'I'm going,' Jouras said, getting up. He looked at all his comrades one after the other. 'Be careful,' he said, passing in front of the crouching Oliver. 'Good-bye, old fellow.'

He went along the Fraternity zigzag. He wasn't back in the evening. They served his meal in his mess-tin.

'Put the meat in the lid,' Jolivet said. 'He doesn't like it when it's in the gravy.'

When he still hadn't come back later, Jolivet put the meat in with the rest and closed the mess-tin.

'It's going to be cold all the same,' Camous said.

'We'll warm it up,' Jolivet said.

The next day they had to admit that he was no longer among them. The mess-tin stayed on the table. They pushed it to a corner and stuck a candle on the lid. Jolivet eventually emptied the mess-tin outside. It smelled bad and the piece of meat was mouldy with hairs.

There was some work to be done near the 'Dysentery.' The whole area was a mud lake, where the ground had been blasted by a mine explosion. The men were taken to a barbed-wire enclosure with wooden posts. They fixed up iron spikes crosswise and rolled along some 'bearskins'. They were in a kind of parade-ground, in sight too of a good part of the savage, deserted country-side which reached to the horizon. Camous stopped working. He looked far into the distance. 'That's a forest down there,' he said.

But it was just a trick of the shadow which even in broad daylight now passed across their eyes.

'It's a forest!' His startled eyes grew blue, as though full of a sky that only he could see. 'Don't you realize we should be down there setting up traps for the roe-buck?' His fingers tested the skilful knot of the high brace in the barbed wire. 'If I had some really smooth slip-wire, I'd make you one of those traps that could hold a man.'

'Let's see,' Jolivet said, 'I'll go and get you some.'

'Look,' Camous said, 'you turn it like that, you make a shoe-lace loop, but you don't tighten it, then you pass the end through the knot and you pull. There you are!'

'You say that it could hold a man?'

'That's eight-and-a-half wire. It would more likely hold two than one.'

They all saw the forest now. It moved nearer until it rustled its leaves against their cheeks.

'They're pines,' Oliver said.

'You're crazy,' Camous said. 'Pines? They're beech trees. That green there, old fellow, that thick green, it's a beech grove. Look how far above the ground it reaches. There's nothing you can teach me about forests and their smells.'

La Poule lifted his eyes and looked at the forest. But it had disappeared. All he saw was the flour-and-water sky.

'Mushrooms,' he said, 'on the cinders, with parsley and butter.'

'Oh, yes,' Camous said. But, suddenly, biting his teeth together, he fell silent. The evening, seated on the edge of the hole, gazed at them with its huge shadowy eyes.

All at once there really was a forest down there. There were trees, wild rivers, sluggish rivers, and wide plains clustered with thickets. There were black steeples behind the birch trees, herds, a group of hills. There was a big white bull. The fellow who saw it pretended to shake the little bell as though he was coming to market with a handsome stud.

They brought back all these dreams to the trench. The dreams pattered around them like thick mist, like a faraway greeting from life.

'What does a roebuck do when it's trapped?' Jolivet asked.

'Its head goes in and it pulls. So the wire squeezes the throat. The roebuck twists its head and struggles. The more it twists and the more it pulls, the tighter the wire squeezes. Like this.' Camous put his head on the side and stretched out his tongue full length.

'That's how it is, and its mouth is full of froth.'

'And for men?'

'Same thing,' Camous said.

Maimon, the corporal and La Poule were playing cards. Oliver watched them. Jolivet polished a sou between his fingers to make a lighter-cap.

Camous was down at the far end, in the shadow. 'Jolivet,' he called out, 'those animals I told you about, sometimes they take all night to die, twisting and foaming, and eating into the earth. Their lungs are black.'

'I didn't ask you to tell me,' Jolivet said.

'I'm telling you,' said Camous.

The card party was going slowly.

'And it's the same for the men,' Camous said.

Jolivet went on polishing his sou.

'You hear?'

'I hear, so what?'

'You're a real shit,' Camous said. They heard his bunk creak as he got up.

'Cut that noise out!' the corporal said. 'If you want to scream at each other, fuck off outside and leave the rest of us in peace.'

'He's a real shit,' Camous shouted, 'a real shit! He told me to make a wire trap for catching men. He told me to give it to him. He put it under the iron spikes and he's planning to set it in the backwoods down there. It'll catch a man and keep him. That iron wire will strangle the guy. He'll stay there all the night perhaps foaming and biting the earth, waiting for death, and he'll die there, in the wire that I knotted with my own fingers. A man! No!'

'What's he saying?' La Poule asked.

'Yes,' Camous said. He was breathing like a bull. Jolivet polished his sou between his fingers.

'Is that true?' the corporal asked.

Jolivet whistled softly without answering.

The corporal stood up. 'Jolivet, I'm asking you.'

'Could be,' Jolivet said.

'Yes or no? Answer me!'

'Yes,' Jolivet said, 'so what?'

'I'll knock his face in,' Camous shouted.

'Jolivet,' the corporal said, 'take away that trap immediately, you hear! If you don't, I'll take you out into the ditch and I'll strangle you!' There was silence for a moment. You could hear the candle-flame jumping. Jolivet looked at them. His big eyes were sad and soft.

'Go on,' Oliver said gently. He had just felt Madeleine's letter rub against his skin, that letter full of words of peace, bread of friendship, and tender, loving phrases.

'. . . Go on!'

Jolivet got up and went out.

'Let's play,' the corporal said. 'When you think about it,' he said after a moment, 'one of our own men might have fallen into it.'

'A fifty-fifty chance,' La Poule said.

The captain came looking for Oliver and La Poule. He drew near the entrance of the trench and whistled. La Poule, who was killing lice in the seams of his trousers, got dressed and climbed out.

'Chabrand!' he called after a while.

'Look,' the captain said, 'I want both of you to keep guard at my door every night. In shifts. Exempt from first rank, all fatigues duties . . . logs, meals, latrines, the whole lot.'

Stretching out his arm, which bore the stripes of his rank on it, he waved his hand in a gesture that smoothed out life once and for all.

Oliver came in first from guard. 'It's time!'

La Poule was writing near the candle. The others were sleeping.

'What's it like outside?'

'Dark.'

'Is it cold?'

'Bring your blanket.'

'It's so black,' La Poule said as he stepped out of the trench.

He banged his helmet against the logs.

The candle was nearly down to the level of the iron wire. Its grease dripped on to the abandoned greatcoat in Jouras's empty place. Maimon wasn't snoring. There was no noise tonight, except for the drip of water, slightly faster than usual, through the crack in the wooden boards. They were all asleep. They held on tightly to their sleep. Oliver stretched out under his blanket. At first he stayed still to get warm, then he started gently moving his shoulders to get warmer. He closed his eyes. He heard a foot on the steps of the trench. He's coming back? Is it time already? Four o'clock? Or what on earth? He looked at the candle. It was still near the level of the iron wire. That wasn't La Poule's walk, nor any of the other's. It sounded like somebody searching out the steps, unsure of the way. The man called out softly. 'Hey, there!' His arms must have been stretched out. He drew his hands along the logs to feel his way. He appeared, bent double, too big for the porch of earth. He straightened up. The candle flame shot up at the sudden draught made by his entry.

'Regotaz!'

He was there, warm, clear, solid. He held his good, thick hands out over the candle and gently calmed it. Oliver hoisted himself up on to his elbow. But what about the greatcoat sleeve all stiff with the juice of man, and that little bit of brain that he'd torn away from the fluff at the bend in the elbow and thrown into the mud?

What about the disgust that he still felt in his fingers at having touched Regotaz's bare brain?

'Hey there!' Regotaz called softly, looking at the sleepers.

'Hey!' Oliver said.

'Ah, you're there?'

With leaps of its tongue the candle licked the man's bulky wake as he drew nearer.

'Ah, you're there?' he said again. 'I was looking for you.' He touched Oliver's body under the blanket. 'You're there?' He kept his heavy hand on Oliver's legs.

'. . . I've been looking for you a long time.'

Oliver fixed his elbow firmly in the bed's rough cover.

'Don't get up,' Regotaz said.

'But how can it be . . . How come that you're here now?' Oliver said. 'Tell me where are you? Still there?

At the end of the trench the corporal heaved a deep sigh in his sleep and moved his legs.

Regotaz bit back a word. 'They're sleeping . . . I spoke too loud.'

'No, but . . . .'

'Look.' He leaned towards Oliver. He turned his back to the candle, but Oliver saw his eyes and his beard. They seemed to be lit up, because beneath them his damp mouth shone with a soft light.

'I wanted to bring you this.' He rummaged in his pocket and drew out something that crackled. It was a fir-cone.

'I wanted to bring you this. I thought about it for a long time. The kernels are good. They're nutmegs. I know how to choose. So, I told myself, that'll sure make him happy. And then in the noise, in the depths of the noise, listen!' He slowly straightened his arm rattled the fir-cone against Oliver's ear. 'You hear! The tree! The squirrel! Listen to the noise!'

Oliver stopped breathing. He listened. The sound flowed through him like a stream with all its reflections. The forest rustled in his heart. Soil rubbed his lips, wind blew over his head.

'How did you know . . .?' Oliver said. 'I thought of that the other day . . . I wanted one. How . . .? Did you get them in a packet?'

'I took it from the tree.'

'Have you been on leave?' Regotaz's body trembled softly like smoke. 'Are you pissed?' Oliver asked softly.

The wet mouth shone beneath the beard. The candle crackled against its iron wire. Regotaz slowly drew away his hand to stop the noise. There was a heavy silence. 'I also wanted to bring you a small snake, but I was afraid I'd frighten you.'

'What!' Oliver meant, 'Say that again!' He had heard, but he needed to hear a second time, to be sure.

Regotaz continued. His voice kept to the same steady, unpersuasive tone. 'And that lizard rolling in the grass of the threshing-floor, near the roll of corn. A little lizard only just out of its egg. It was quite green already with drops of water over its scales. And violets. Dark places beneath the grass where the violet is hidden. And the little snake, the one that was swimming in the middle of the stream. You would have said a water bird with its neck erect and its precious little fits of anger, like a little serpent. I caught hold of it by the middle. It snapped its two ends around my arms.'

'Regotaz! Regotaz!' Oliver almost shouted. 'I've done that too in our stream. I caught a snake. It was there like a bird. It thrashed its green tail round like a wind-

mill sail. I did it. Regotaz! But . . . but . . .' Regotaz's hand was still heavy on his legs. Oliver cleared his throat. 'But where are you? With the Seventh?'

'With the Seventh,' Regotaz said.

'You've come from down there?'

'From down there.'

'I haven't seen you now for a long time.'

'And I've been wanting to see you for a long time.' Regotaz's voice sounded like thick vapours rising up from damp wood and passing through the leaves '. . . For a long time.' He started stroking Oliver's legs.

'Yes, but the snake,' Oliver said abruptly, 'the snake, the lizard, the violet, the fir-cone? You're pissed or crazy or I don't know what . . . . It's winter now.' Oliver gently touched that good hand loaded with pity and understanding. 'So . . . .?'

'So?' Regotaz said, astonished. 'So . . .?' He stretched out his left hand again to quieten the candle, to quieten the entire world, it seemed, for the gesture sowed a silence that unfurled to the extremity of the night. 'Do you still have that little handkerchief which smells of lavender?' he asked. 'Do you still have that letter where she calls you "my handsome love, my beautiful love, my sweet"?'

'Yes,' Oliver said, 'yes, I've got it. I've got the handkerchief, I've got the letter, it's here.'

He touched his shirt-pocket, there, on his heart. He was full of sweetness, calm and hope, as when you breathe in the May wind. Outside the wind shook, carrying off the rain.

But . . . but . . . he's dead, Oliver thought suddenly. 'What difference does that make?' the luminous mouth of Regotaz asked loudly. He began moving backwards, guiding himself with his outstretched arms.

Oliver kept on looking at the sweet, moist mouth in the beard. He lost sight of it for a moment. He screwed up his eyes. He looked for it. It was in the same place. It was the reflection of the candle on the side of an empty can.

La Poule came. Oliver was still leaning on his elbow watching the bright reflection.

'Chabrand!'

'Yes.'

'Come here! You have to hear it! Come on out and see!'

Oliver pushed back his blanket. 'If you only knew what has just happened to me. Here, inside.'

'Come on quickly,' La Poule said, 'you'll tell me afterwards.'

The night was so thick outside that you could feel it on the edge of your nose.

'Ah, old fellow,' Oliver said, 'if you only knew.'

'You're going to see something,' La Poule said. He tapped the right-hand wall. 'It's there. Take off your helmet. Don't make any noise. Come in and listen.'

They came to a small covered landing first, then the staircase that went down towards the captain's room. A patch of wan light shook at the bottom of a puddle of water. Somebody was talking softly.

'Who's he with?' Oliver whispered.

'Listen.'

From above they saw the feet of a table and the captain's legs underneath. He must be sitting on his wooden armchair, leaning back with his legs stretched out. His arms hung down heavily. His voice grew loud.

'. . . No, my girl, you're sewing on the slant, you're overcasting, it's coming out like a cushion . . . .'

In the darkness the two men held back their breath.

'. . . Lower the lamp. It always tends to smoke, the screw thread's worn out, the wick climbs up. Tomorrow, if you go by New Street, take it to Blaise's.'

La Poule grabbed Oliver's arm. He drew near Oliver and squeezed against him.

'You're there?' he said. 'Listen well.'

The captain moved his legs. They heard him tapping on the table and softly scratching the wood. '. . . Look at this cat,' he said, 'see how it plays. Look at it, my girl, you'll have time enough to ruin your eyesight sewing. Look at him. Hop, skip, jump! See what I mean . . .?' He broke off from laughing and tapping the table.

'. . . Tell me, my little one, you haven't let Isabelle play alone in the courtyard today. She was coughing a bit. I asked her if she wasn't in pain . . . .'

There was a heavy silence. '. . . She's got your eyes,' he said, 'but her hair's like mine. Her chin and mouth, they're mine, but the forehead's yours. She'll have broad shoulders like me, you can see already. She moves her arms the way you do, but she's got long legs like me. They're my hands. Little one! My girl! Leave your overcasting. Come here, my wife, come here . . . .'

'He's alone,' La Poule whispered, 'He's absolutely alone.'

They stretched out side by side in the guard-hole near the door. La Poule's teeth were chattering.

'Are you cold?' Oliver asked.

'No, but I can't help it. What did you want to tell me about back there? What happened?'

'The same thing that happened here,' Oliver said, pointing at the captain's door.

The white dawn tried to slide between the heavy night and the small crest of hill 34. The bare, blasted earth was visible now with Santerre lying flat under the weight of the sky. They heard the captain climbing up. He emerged from the doorway doubled up. He straightened out. He had put on his sheepskin chasuble, with the fur outside. In one hand he carried his big flick-knife. In the other he held a decapitated herring round the belly. It squirted out its roe. He chewed the fish. 'Good morning,' he said. He picked out a long, bent bone from the back of his mouth.

All of a sudden they knew where the others were. Until now they hadn't been able to guess their position from the sight of Santerre, the mist, and the horizon that might have been limitless beyond the mist. It was still calm. Two bursts of machine-gun fire were followed by a shell that came from far away, passed high above and disappeared. It was always calm, as Jouras had said when he returned from the first guard, calm. They knew all of a sudden where the others were. Towards evening a wind stirred the mist. After a moment they heard noises, footsteps, trampling in the mud and earth, but they didn't pay too much attention. Their thoughts were centred round the old life that they had lost, that old life which trickled through the minutes of the day in the heavy calm. And then, suddenly, the wind expelled the mist. A large expanse of empty ground was clearly visible.

'Come and see! Come and see!' the corporal shouted.

They looked over the edge of the trench. The enemy

were down there about a hundred yards away. They were running, the wind had taken them by surprise. On one side, they came out of the mist, and on the other, they went into it. They were marching right in the middle of the field above the trench. Surprised by the wind, the enemy were bent double. They ran holding their guns like sticks and, from time to time, in the dark line of their herd, the pale stain of a face looked towards the trench.

'As long as our mortars . . . .'

They looked in the direction of their trench artillery. On the hand-grenade site they saw the heads of the artillery men above ground level. They were also looking at the enemy. Oliver lifted his hand up high, then he waved it slowly up and down telling them to be careful, to stay calm. In reply the sergeant signalled that he was not to worry.

'Yes, willingly,' Jolivet had said. His eyes were full of sorrow. The tears had run down his face and dug out two big furrows from under his eyes to his mouth. From then on he went on guard alone at the outpost in a small hole in front of the barbed wire. There was just room for him. He folded himself up inside the hole that was stuffed full of mist, as if by a huge flat stone. Jolivet disappeared from the surface of the earth.

'It's because he isn't getting any more letters,' La Poule said.

Oliver remembered the Jolivet of the reinforcements, a new man from top to bottom, with round cheeks and a small smile, bright with malice, flowering round his sweet white teeth.

One morning Jolivet was squeezed into his mud.

'Sir! Sir!' The miserable face of a man peered over the edge of the hole. Jolivet took his gun.

'Comrade!' the man shouted with all the force of his poor body, with so much force that afterwards he remained there trembling, emptied out, with his mouth open and his eyes closed. He was whiter than mist, whiter than the frothy spittle dribbling from his open mouth.

'Hey, you,' Jolivet said. He grabbed him by the collar and pulled him towards the hole. The other helped himself along with his knees and elbows. He fell into the hole. Three machine-gun bullets whistled by from behind him. 'Stay there,' Jolivet said. 'Lie down!'

The other stretched out in the bottom of the hole, with his mouth in the earth. He turned his head to one side and looked at the big brown man who was spying out in front, a hand on the breech of his gun. The machine-gun stopped. Then it started again, trying out another side of that mist.

'Stand up,' Jolivet said. First he stood up himself to make sure that all was well. He held his gun round the middle like a club. 'Stand up!'

He was a poor figure of a man, too small for his thick uniform. His neck stood out from the middle of the collar like a pencil, the sleeves were stretched out by the weight of equipment on his shoulders. And in his face, Jolivet could recognize his own. The sorrow overflowed from his eyes like wax from a candle. His cheeks were scratched. The man took off his helmet which left a red streak round his forehead like thorn marks.

'Hey, you!' Jolivet said.

'Yes, sir,' the fellow said with the smallest of smiles in

which he gave himself quickly, completely, only to fall back at once into his anxiety.

'Go ahead. I'll take you to the captain.' Jolivet made a sign with his hand. The prisoner marched in front of him. He turned round from time to time with a questioning look.

'Yes, straight ahead,' Jolivet said, and to himself he muttered, 'the slut, the slut, she hasn't written for over a month, she's up to something, that's for sure . . . . Wait.'

Jolivet leaned over the staircase. All he could see was the straw-coloured puddle of the candle below. 'Captain!' he called

There was a drawn out sound of creaking wood, followed by a grunt.

He doesn't seem to be in the best of moods. Jolivet thought. It wasn't very smart of me to bring this guy along. He called out, 'There's a prisoner here, captain.'

'Bring him down,' came the grunted reply from below.

Not at all smart of me, Jolivet thought. He said gently: 'Come on, old fellow, we're going down.'

As soon as they were down, the prisoner stiffened. He looked as though he was hanging from a noose, neck stretched out, chin in the air, body like wood, fingers grasping the skin of this thighs. You could see nothing down there, except, at the end, a dark, massive hulk in the wooden armchair. The captain got up, the chair creaked. The captain drew near. The prisoner stared at Jolivet without moving his head, his eyes looked as though they had been unscrewed from their sockets. And in his gaze, in this hole of dirty blue water, everything was suddenly revealed. The great confusion inside, the rent, the wound, the bruise of the heart, oh, my wife, my little ones, my flesh, my joy, my world, my life! Gentlemen, don't kill me, don't kill me, gentlemen! Jolivet held on tight to the barrel of his gun. He looked at the captain. If he touches him, he thought, if he makes the mistake of touching him, I'll knock him across the face with the butt-end.

The captain slid his big body round the edge of the table.

If he touches him, he's had it, Jolivet thought.

The gun-butt left the ground. It happened very quickly. The captain took the prisoner's hands in his and he stroked them gently. His face shone with silent laughter.

It's been like this for eight days now. Julia comes into the kitchen. The shutters are closed, there is nobody there. The soup simmers under the lid of the pot. It looks as if nobody's there, but after a moment, if Julia stays still, she hears, intermingled with the noise of the soup, a small sob half held back, and it's Madeleine who is crying. Eight days! The little one's face is all puffy and her eyes look vacantly through everything. The blood looks blue under her skin. When she was a kid, her face was full of freckles, then this luscious skin came to her, a dusky, delicate skin like that of an apricot, but now her freckles are back, pinned over her forehead and round her eyes. What was wrong with her?

Julia went to the window and opened the shutters. Madeleine was on her knees in front of the table. Her arm was curled up underneath between the spinach and the dirty glasses. Her face was hidden in her arm. She was crying.

'Oh, my little Madeleine,' Julia said. With her wide open, leaf-fresh hand she covered Madeleine's head and gently started caressing it with her fingers.

'What's the matter, Madeleine, tell me. You know that you can tell me everything. Ever since . . .' Between her fingers, Julia felt all the skin of the little, trembling head that was overcome by this mighty weeping which had lasted so long. With her right arm Madeleine embraced the shaft of Julia's leg while Julia continued caressing the little one's hair.

'There's father,' Julia said suddenly, snatching herself away from Madeleine's caress.

Madeleine straightened up, took the dishcloth quickly from the hook on the wall and pretended to clean the glasses under the table. She looked at Julia with exhausted, sorrowful eyes. The father didn't come in. He sat down on the bench in front of the open window. Taiste Martin was with him.

'She was ill,' Taiste said. 'She vomited. She'd never really been fat. The doctor came, looked at her, touched her. She watched him like a cat. He touched her belly with the flat of his hand. I looked on. So, I told myself, she's got fat! The doctor said: "There's nothing to do except get the cradle ready." You could have floored me with a straw. "She's only sixteen," I told him. So, he told me, "Sixteen, you think that isn't old enough? Here's proof . . ." It's Michonne's son. There's a chance he hasn't left yet. He's a nice enough kid. At least if he isn't I'd be surprised. So, I went along there and I said . . .' Madeleine put the glass on the table without looking up and threw up her arm. Then her legs gave way. She slid against a wall, scraping her cheek against the plaster.

'Madeleine, Madeleine, my sweet,' Julia fretted softly, running to support her.

That evening, Julia went into Madeleine's room. The little one was there, in front of the mirror, night-shirt rolled up, looking at her belly. She lowered her night-shirt. Tears started running down her face.

'Hush,' Julia said, a finger on her lips. Then: 'Lie

down, Madeleine, I'm going to bring you something.'

Madeleine heard her poking around downstairs with padded hands in the cupboards. Sometimes she couldn't prevent a bottle or box from making a noise. Madeleine, who knew the kitchen as well as the palm of her hand, understood that she had taken the spirit stove, the bottle of old brandy and the small tin that Julia had hidden at the bottom of the cupboard and warned her never to touch. It was for the rats. Then Julia took the chopper and chopped something without making too much noise. She tore some cloth. Then there was a long silence. You could no longer hear anything, except at the end of the corridor their father's breathing which frightened them when he started snoring.

'I'm ready,' Julia said when she came back, 'but wait a minute, put the candle behind the night table. If father wakes up he won't see the light.' Julia held a big jar of green ointment in her left hand. Her right index finger was hooked round a steaming cup, full to the brim with a thick infusion. In the rest of her right hand she grasped the box of pills.

'Wait.' She slipped the ointment on the marble top of the chest of drawers, to be free of it. 'There you are. First of all you have to put that firmly into you, tightened with a cloth, there, all hot. If it bites a bit, hold on. Take the covers off, I'm going to put it in place.'

The poultice was heavy and burning. Immediately its acid began eating into Madeleine's most delicate parts. She clenched her teeth and snorted like a beast in pain. She threw her head back onto the pillow.

'There now,' Julia said, 'it'll soon pass.'

The muffled, crackling sounds of the farm sleeping around them reached the two women. A lamb cried in the shed. The mare tapped its foot, the foal drew too much on the tit.

'Now, take a drink.' Julia lifted up Madeleine's head in her arm and raised the cup to her lips. It smelled of fennel and aniseed, absinthe and the terrible rue, black shadow of the earth. There was something at the bottom of the infusion that she stirred with a spoon. And the smell of the fennel was suddenly smothered by the dingy smell of this soot of sickly ryes.

'Drink, force yourself, force your mouth open, force your throat. You have to force yourself, Madeleine.'

The ewe below moaned tremulously to the lamb. Madeleine hiccupped as if she was going to vomit. Julia flattened her hand over the little one's mouth.

'Force yourself, Madeleine, force yourself. Get it all down into your belly. It'll do the trick. Force yourself.'

Madeleine shook her head on the pillow.

'Keep your mouth closed, force yourself.'

A wave coming up from her belly shook Madeleine's chest. She clenched her teeth. She gave a mighty sneeze. The infusion rushed out of her nostrils in two sticky lines. Julia wiped her face with the back of her hand.

'Of course,' she said, 'it isn't natural, it's against nature. That's why you've got to force yourself. What can you do at a time like this? Force yourself, you're a woman.'

Madeleine poured all the infusion into her mouth and, with a big shake of her head, she made it go down inside her.

'Julia!' a man's voice called in the corridor.

Julia didn't reply. She blew out the candle. It was their father. They could hear him coming along the

corridor in his bare feet. He touched Julia's door. He called softly. 'Julia!'

'Don't be frightened,' Julia said quietly.

The father came. He put his hand on the door-handle. He opened the door.

'Madeleine,' he said.

In the darkness, Julia imitated the long, slow breathing of somebody sleeping peacefully. The father listened. He closed the door and moved away. After a moment, Julia went on tiptoe to get the candle-stick. She lit the candle. Madeleine was sitting on the bed, her eyes closed. She had vomited all down herself. Her nightshirt was stained, her breasts were dirty from the infusion. A little purple froth was hanging from the corner of her lips.

'I'll change your clothes,' Julia said. 'You've managed to keep a little of it down all the same.'

'There you are, you're all clean now, it'll be all right. Lie down, my little Madeleine. Move over, I'm going to sleep with you, I'll look after you. Don't be afraid, we'll make it go away. Lie down now.'

# *News from Casimir*

Jerome hesitated at the doorway. 'Julia,' he said, 'tell me who this fellow is who's coming up the road.'

Julia's heart missed a beat. Madeleine stayed with her needle in the air, pale and damp like a branch that has just been skinned of its bark. She gave a muffled moan as if she had just been hit on the neck. Joseph! Julia looked and said: 'No!'

The fellow was coming up the road on crutches. One of his legs was missing. 'Hello, there!' he shouted, and he laughed.

They recognized him from the sound of his voice and laughter. 'It's Casimir!'

'Put the coffee on the stove,' the father said.

They welcomed him and told him to sit down.

'Can I help you?' Julia asked, reaching out for the crutches.

'I'm used to it,' Casimir said.

He had grown fat and sallow. The fat was white and shaking, it almost hid his eyes. They had a lot of questions to ask each other. Casimir tapped the father on his thighs. Jerome was just about to do the same, but then he drew back his hand, afraid of tapping something that wasn't there. It wouldn't have been the right thing.

'Hey, Julia,' Casimir said, 'come over here. You're

always close to your stove. Come here, I've got news of your man.'

'I'm making your coffee.'

'Oh, come on now, come over here so I can tell you about your man. He's pining away for you, you know. He told me to come and see you. The morning I left he leaned out of the window and shouted, "Go and see her!" '

'How is he?' Julia asked.

'He's all right. His arm's stopped running. He let me have a look at it. He'll be here in a month. Sometimes I do the kitchen rounds, because then I can get myself hauled up into the pantry by the cable. You see, he's on the third floor, it isn't easy to climb the stairs with this joke of a leg. I go to the kitchen. "Sister," I say to the nun, "hoist me up like the meat." She laughs and says: "You'll always be the same. Come on, get inside." It's a cage big as the table. I squeeze myself in. She presses the button and I shoot up to the third floor. "Hello, there, Casimir!" he says. I go and sit next to his bed and then your ears should burn. We talk about you, about your father, and the land, and then about you, Madeleine. Where is Madeleine?'

'I'm here,' Madeleine said, without raising her eyes from her sewing. Through the open door they watched the mare playing with her foal. The foal tried jumping up at the sun. It leaped so high that afterwards it sniffed its legs with astonishment.

'When I get back,' Casimir said, 'they're going to rig me up with an iron leg, with a joint at the knee. Like a real one.'

'So,' Jerome said, 'you say he's in good health then?'

'In good health? Like me,' Casimir said. 'Fat like me.'

Julia looked at this soft, sallow man. Casimir had lost that redness of men in the sun. He had the white, fat hands of those who are served their meals and have no effort to make except open their mouths. They fatten in their chairs like sacks. Julia had not forgotten what a handsome worker he was before, slim and tough as an old bean.

'We're well fed,' Casimir said. 'Two courses at ten o'clock, and two courses in the evening with soup. And then, I go to the kitchen. I tap at the door. "Sister," I say, "a little more meat." "It's against the rules," she says. I wink at her and she gives me another bit.'

With a sudden spring, the cat jumped at a gad-fly. It crouched down and held the insect between its claws. It chewed the corslet of hard carbon that was full of bitter honey. The cat licked its mouth to free its whiskers from the two blue wings.

'Really, Monsieur Jerome, we couldn't have got a better deal, Joseph and me. There are other hospitals, you know, where they make you spit out your tripes and guts. Where we are it's sweet as Paradise. It's just behind the town, where the Rhone winds. There's a big park, the Rhone's at the end. You see, the Rhone makes a turn like this. When I couldn't use the crutches, they carried me up to the front steps, just at the corner. I listened to the whistles of the boats. All of a sudden, between the trees, I saw the mast and the small flags on the ropes. I watched it pass by down there on the Rhone. It went all round the park, then it disappeared with a blow of its whistle. It's going down to Valence, I told myself.'

'How much sugar?'

'Two will be fine. Shall I take them with my fingers?'

'As you like.'

'Yes, so I was telling you, it's the nuns who look after us. One of them looks a little like you, Julia, when you were a girl. It was Joseph who made me notice that. Don't worry, there's no risk. She's a nun, she's made the sign of the cross over everything that's worth having in life. Could you give me a teaspoon? Yes, so they lined us up. Those without a leg on one side, those without an arm on the other. Over here those who don't have any legs at all, and over there those who don't have any arms at all. And further off, those who don't have either legs or arms.'

'Good God!' Madeleine moaned softly.

Casimir drank. 'Julia, when it comes to the juice there's nobody like you, you know. This is good as mocha! So Jerome, what do you say to that?'

'Eh, my boy, I say . . . what do you want me to say? I just listen, I imagine you there inside.'

'At this time of the year it's full of roses of all colours, with names on the labels, all beautifully arranged. There are Madame Herriots, Madame Poincarés, Marvels of Peru, Big Velvets, French Roses, Battles of the Marne. All of them set out in little squares with stakes. Because of the leg that's left to me, I have to take some exercise. So, I set off along avenue Foch, turn down avenue Joffre, take the rue de Pétain at the edge of the water, then past the Allies' roundabout, and I go down to the bottom to listen to the blind men playing the accordion. Ah, the blind! In fact they've put them all together down there at the bottom. That really made history, their playing the accordion! Just think that before they had the accordion they spent their whole time in the darkness, those men! It nearly drove them mad. We had to guard the bank of the Rhone. One day one of them had somebody buy him a flute for four sous. He started playing. It made you weep. The Mother Superior came. "What you need is an accordion," she said. "How do you know that, Mother Superior?" they asked her. "Ah," she said, "I imagine it's so." "I know how to play," one of them said. So some rich girl in the town bought an accordion for the blind. Ever since then they haven't asked for anything, they listen. When we go to town on Sunday, all in a band, with the blind pushing the bath-chairs of those who don't have any legs, they don't leave the accordion behind. They take it with them. They know they won't be able to play in the town, it's forbidden. They take it all the same and every now and then they ask: "Have you got it?" "Yes," the other replies.'

The flies buzzed in the dish of peaches. The sun romped in the grass. The big blue backbone of the hill blocked the doorway. In the distance, the wind trampled through the olive groves and the grey foam of the leaves got entangled under its heel.

'Oh,' Casimir said, 'talking about the blind, there's something I've got to tell you. Listen, Julia. Come here, Madeleine. This nun, Matilda, who's so pretty, really pretty, you know, and delicate, you can see the blood flowing under the skin of her cheeks. Well, listen, Julia, one of these blind fellows, he's not only blind, they had to give him another face from what was left behind. No nose, no mouth, nothing. They fixed it all up again as best they could, except for his eyes. He's blind. He knows he's with the blind, he knows they don't see him. But when he puts his hand on his face to knock away

a fly or something, he takes it away at once as though he was burning himself. This little nun, Matilda, the moment she comes into the garden, she looks for this fellow. He's always alone, crouched down in a nest of grass. She comes and crouches down next to him. I was there once. She saw me. He didn't see me. She looked at me with her smile of sugar. He said to her: "Sister, let me touch you." She let him touch her. He passed his hand over her face. He touched her nose. "The nose," he said. He touched her eyes. "The eyes," he said. He touched her mouth. "The mouth," he said. He passed his fingers all round her mouth. "Bite me, sister." She bit him gently. "Harder! So it leaves a mark." Then he took away his fingers and with the remains of his lips he tried to touch the mark of the teeth.'

When Casimir had left, Jerome contrived to meet Julia all alone near the pigsties.

'Tell me, Julia, listen, you've seen Madeleine. What's wrong with her? Is she ill? She must be ill, you've seen her face. And, then, did you notice, when Casimir was talking, she was laughing.'

After feeding the pigs their mash, Julia returned, weighed down by her thoughts and her struggle against fate. 'Madeleine!' she called.

'I'm here!'

She was there, next to the open window. The beautiful plain faded away towards the evening. It leaned against the eastern edge where the night rose up, as if to pour its load of shining leaves into the approaching darkness. Julia knelt down next to Madeleine.

'So, it had no effect,' she said.

'None.'

'If only you'd have drunk up all the infusion. Listen, there's somebody I can take you to. She helped a girl who was in a more advanced state than you.'

'No,' Madeleine said.

'You're not in pain?' Julia asked gently.

Madeleine shook her head. 'It's not because of the pain,' she said. 'It's because I want to keep Oliver. I love him, Julia, I love him! I'll have a child from him, it'll be him. That's the only way I know to save my Oliver. Nobody'll be able to take him from me, he'll be for me all alone. Whole! Entire! My love!'

'Be quiet, be quiet!' Julia said, putting a hand on her mouth.

There were three precise little blows on the door below, then the noise of somebody moving back into the straw of the threshing-floor to look up at the window. Julia listened, holding her breath. Joseph was asleep, lying beside her. He had arrived in the five o'clock mail-coach. He was nailed to her by the hook of his thin thigh. Julia gently took hold of that thigh at the top, by the thick part, unhooked it, and slipped out of bed. She stood up. Joseph remained deep in sleep.

Julia opened the door. As recently as yesterday she used a whole piece of lard on the hinges. She went down the stairs on her heels, because anybody on the look-out would have heard the noise of her toe-nails on the stone.

There were splinters of broken glass on the kitchen floor. Joseph had thrown a bottle at Madeleine's head. Fortunately the little one had ducked. She had run towards the door, at which he had grabbed the jug in his hand, as though about to throw that at her too. There's some strength in his left hand.

There was another small knock on the door. Julia touched the frame of the doorway with the palms of her hands. She touched the lock, but not the key; instead she went higher and only opened the peep-hole. Outside the night was clear. The man was there with his face stuck against the small window.

'Julia!' With his low voice, he breathed into the room the tart sweat of August.

'Yes,' Julia said softly.

'It's three days now. Come!'

'No, I've got my man.'

'What man?'

'My own.'

The big face no more than skin and bone, with a head like a beast's, eyes like stars, and the large ravenous mouth wounded by more than hunger.

'Do you want some bread?'

'You!'

'Tobacco?'

'You, Julia, come on, I need you, I'm alone, alone! Only once. Just once more. Come, Julia!'

There was silence for a moment. The man's big body trembled against the wood of the door.

'No,' Julia said, 'it's no.'

The man breathed heavily into Julia's face. His breath smelled of raw grass and tobacco.

'I'll give you some bread, if you want, and some cartridges.'

'I don't give a fuck for your bread.'

An owl hooted.

'And I don't give a fuck for you.'

He spat into the peep-hole. Julia closed the little shutter and put up the bar. The man leaned with all his weight against the door. She listened to the cracking of his bones and his heavy, weary breathing, like an animal's. He went away. Julia wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. The man's spittle was running down to her lips.

Joseph was asleep. He didn't wake up, he didn't turn

round. The hook of his thigh was still there, in the air, waiting for the woman's flesh. Julia climbed gently into the bed. She checked to see if Joseph was well covered, over there, on the right side which he couldn't look after alone any longer. She stretched out under the hook of thigh. She drew her night-shirt up like a cushion under her chin. She took Joseph's left hand and spread out his fingers. She put one of her breasts in the full of that left hand and, softly, she stayed there, under that hand, breathing and living.

## *To the Slaughterhouse*

'Wake up behind!' Somebody tapped Oliver's helmet.

'What's up?' he asked, slipping in the mud.

The entire line slept as they marched. They were approaching a convoy. In the night they drew near to a road that muttered like a river. It smelled of horses' sweat and dung. Below them in the distance, the night, split by lights, bled across the rolling hills.

'All I ask for,' La Poule said, 'is a kick from a horse in the belly. I'm already half-dead.'

'Move over!'

'Chabrand!'

'I'm here,' Oliver replied, 'here.' He grabbed La Poule's arm.

'Finished! I'm finished!' La Poule shouted. 'They want to kill us.'

There was a whistle to halt. The convoy was below in the fields. They prepared a pile of arms. The men sat down in the mud of the slope.

'La Poule.'

Oliver leaned over. La Poule was stretched out on the earth.

'All right,' La Poule said, 'it's all right. I'm pulling myself together.'

The day came, green and sharp. They crossed a large dead track of railway line. The level-crossing gate was torn away. The signal-box was empty, it echoed the soldiers' footsteps. A window was blocked with sacks. A trail of straw crossed the track.

Hedges loomed out of the mist, then a shining ash tree. The fields were spread out on either side. On the left a burning-hot village steamed in the meadow dew. On the other side of the villages and hills, the black road surged with soldiers. They rolled slowly through all the bends of the ground, they filled the valleys, they overflowed the dales, trickled through the woods. Near the village a large lake of soldiers lay asleep in the grass of an empty orchard. The road flowed thick between the trees.

'La Poule!'

Oliver stretched out his thin neck towards the sky. He had torn away his tie and undone his collar. He tried to snatch at some air with his lifeless mouth.

'La Poule!'

'I've got hold of you.' La Poule held Oliver by the shoulders.

'Move on, you guys ahead!'

'Let me take your gun for a while,' La Poule said. 'Lean on me. Come on. We'll stay together.'

Oliver marched on. He put his hands in the straps crossed over his chest and with all his force he tried to free his chest, to breathe.

'Forward!'

He clenched his teeth. He cried, his lips puckered up over his teeth until he looked as though he was going to laugh.

'Forward!'

'Lean on me!'

Camous slipped and fell with his face in the road. He got up, spitting out mud, mucus and blood. There was a soft, grinding rhythm of footsteps on the hard road. Ahead of them there were more than twenty men who marched in step instinctively, because that way you're no longer alone, you're all together, carrying the weight of the body, the weight of the pain, and that makes things easier. Camous tried to get into step and catch the rhythm. Oliver raged, teeth clenched, face twisted with terror, eyes drilled with tears hard as iron.

'On we go, old fellow,' La Poule groaned.

With a huge effort that seemed to rend him apart from top to bottom, Oliver at last got into step with the others. Camous struggled alone. He limped. 'Careful!' he said. He pushed his neighbours with his arms. He got out of the main stream and threw himself down on his back on the slope. He stayed there without moving, gun on its strap, sack on his back, all harnessed up, legs open. The bottom of his trousers was black with blood. He didn't dare move any more. A sergeant came up to him, looking as though he was going to sniff him. Camous lifted his eyes, said a word or two and the sergeant set off again with his nose down.

At the edge of the road, the window of a house watched them suspiciously between the trees. It was a big farm, with a forge right in the middle of the courtyard. An artillery man, naked to the waist, powerfully hammered on a piece of white-hot iron that spattered sparks all around. To one side a big cannon was waiting, covered with dry mud.

'It's the village,' La Poule said. 'This is where we halt.'

As they passed through the village the long line of men rubbed against the walls, looked at the granges and

the sheds full of straw. There were more fields then, fields, hills and woods. About noon they crossed a camp of provision convoys. The convoys swirled towards them, coiled up, and slept there bubbling slowly amid the noise of equipment and tackle. Then they marched on the roads in the middle of the cannons and wagons, their hands and faces covered with mud, their heads swirling with the bitterness and sharpness of blood.

The raw evening was stretched out in the steaming dunghills of a village. A cymbal sounded against the walls. Bugles. The liquid dung ran down the sloping road. Granges, then a square, and a bend in the road.

At this bend a big, fat fellow in a black raincoat was standing. He wore a shining peaked cap. An officer came out of a fine house. He carried a chair in his hand. He came, saluted by touching the tip of his helmet and offered the chair. The man took it, opened the flaps of his coat, sat down heavy and square against the back. He rested his hands and his chin on the handle of his sabre. He looked at the men passing by.

The dawn was hidden in the willow-groves, at the bottom of this flat field, as big as the whole world. They had reached it by the road that led past the birch-tree. Their helmets were white with rime, and the men were steaming from head to foot like horses, carrying their vapour along with them in their footsteps. All the company was entangled in the mist of its sweat. They halted.

'Give me your flask,' Oliver said. 'I'll go to the café.'

A roll of cannon-fire growled against the horizon like a storm at sea.

'It's coming from Bailleul.'

An English soldier, all alone, crossed the field towards a small low farm. He dragged along great balls of earth at the end of his thin legs. Approaching the door, he unbuckled his sack. The warrant-officer came back with the orders.

'In extended order from now on.'

The line of men began spreading out over the field. Those of them near the farm where the English soldier went looked through the window. His sack and gun were lying in the mud near the door. A long procession of trees stretched out along the road ahead of them. There were no leaves on the trees yet, but they were surrounded by the pale green vapours of the spring. The day rose, and the countryside appeared bit by bit. The flat ground was hidden behind thickets. Their knees got damper in the fields of grass through which they passed and the grass itself remained flattened out behind them as though it had been raked. A tall windmill peered above the trees, signalling the men's advance with all its arms.

They halted at a small café at a fork in the road. The whole line of men leaned against it. There were no longer any curtains at the windows. Inside, a young boy standing on a chest took off the coat-racks, loosening the screws with a nail. The walls were bare. The cashier's desk had been pushed aside to make space for a man who was loading up a wheelbarrow with bottles.

A black foam rose up on the side of the sky which reverberated with cannon-fire. A man pulled a cart loaded with mattresses along the road. A salad basket hung from the rail. A woman led her children across a damp tilled field. The man who was pulling the mat-

tresses stopped. The woman let go of her children and fixed her hair. A lame man ran splashing water on one side only. A woman squeezed a chicken against her breasts. A tip-cart carried a chest of drawers with its feet in the air and a sideboard whose unnailed upper part kept shaking. Four women, linked one to the other by baskets full of dishes, took up the entire breadth of the road. A leather-clad English motorcyclist jumped the dips of the ground at full throttle.

They crossed through a long deserted village. All the doors were open. A clock was ticking. At the edge of the street an old woman was sitting in a grandmother's chair. 'I'm waiting,' she said. She had a small bundle of clothes at her feet, the handle of a frying-pan stuck out from under it. She was told to move away.

A general staff car passed the soldiers. Inside, a French general bobbed up and down on the cushions. His face was red and he held his cap on with both hands. Beyond the village, the desert, the night and the heat of cannons waited for them. The black foam was like a wall. A long shell flew near, passed by in the sky and went off towards the sea. The entire stretch of the meadows, thickets and villages rumbled under the men's feet. The wind came up from the sea. It was cold and carried a tart smell of water and grass.

'Halt! Hold on to your equipment!'

They stayed there for a long time, then they stretched out on the ground. Strewn out in the night like a ripe flower, a farm blazed ahead of them.

'What's up with you?' La Poule asked.

'Nothing,' Oliver said.

The wind carried a smell of flowering beans. In the hedge one of the men sang softly: 'We'll go listen to the song of the golden corn.'

'I've got bad news,' Oliver said.

At dawn, across the red sky, they saw men arriving with trunks and bundles. Cartridges, grenades, chocolates, Camembert, big butcher's knives, buckets of alcohol. The major came out of the willow thicket and walked through the grass. He had just met an English officer, bareheaded, helmet hanging from his belt. The old general who had passed yesterday in the car ran across the fields. They waited for him. All three of them talked. The English officer pointed to a corner of the sky and started drawing with the end of his cane on the ground. The major and the general leaned over and watched him. The general took off his cap and scratched his skull with all his fingers. The men saw smoke pouring up from the shell of a hill at which the English officer had pointed. They set off again in single column along the edge of the road, backs bent, guns in their hands. They halted in front of a disembowelled village whose guts were littered across the fields. It was noon. A woman ran all alone on the road. Shells burst in fury on the left against a fragile wooden windmill. They tore the fields to shreds right up to the black depths of the water which spouted up, shining in the glare. A dead horse blocked the stream.

They waited for night. The captain came up to La Poule and Oliver who held his white letter between his fingers. The captain planted himself in front of the two men. 'Boys . . .' he began. He said nothing more, but looked at them for a long moment. The night rose up

behind him in all its necessity. Then his face was lit up only by the metallic day of cannon-fire.

'To your feet!'

And behind him they entered under the sky of iron.

'Kemmel!'

A chunk of earth without trees capsized under the smoke. Two English officers ran, arms hanging.

'Over here!' the lieutenant shouted.

They gestured as they ran. They shouted, but their words were smothered by the bursts of cannon-fire from the belfry at Kemmel.

'They've just brought grenades.'

'No, not that way, they're saying.'

'We're outflanked.'

'Get into extended order as soon as we leave the village.'

The night was torn apart by a shell. Down below, a valley, trees, a park, a pool, a castle, then darkness and the earth falling back. The branches cracked, the slates hissed, the pool slapped the earth with its big muddy hand.

'Dig,' La Poule said. He stretched out near Oliver. The village was hit by shafts of flames and glares like those big iron bars used to fasten folding gates. The night flew by in a blaze of light.

'They're going to come,' La Poule said.

'No,' the lieutenant said, lying flat with his mouth in the earth. 'The English are still holding out ahead there.'

The captain's voice came out of the night. 'Forward!'

They jumped up. A low hedge hit them in the belly.

'Halt!' the lieutenant said. 'Liaison!'

'Here!' Barnous said.

'The captain?'

'Gone ahead.'

'Go and look for him.'

Barnous returned running. 'Lieutenant! The English are a hundred yards off. They asked me if I was French. I told them I was.'

'And on this side?'

'Nothing. Iron wires. Can't get by.'

'French?' a voice asked in the dark. It was an English officer. He took a long time to explain, searching for the words. To the right, three hundred yards away, there was a French battalion. They set off in that direction and reached a slope in the road.

'Major Douce here.'

'Lieutenant Reynaud here, Sixth Company, major.'

'Do you know where we are?'

'No, major.'

'But what are we doing? Where are we going? To the right? Ahead? To the left? Where are the ranks? Here? And your captain? Where's your captain? What's the time, Reynaud?'

'Nine o'clock, major.'

'We're to attack at seven, then?'

'There are empty trenches ahead,' Barnous said.

'What? What's he say?' the major asked. 'Very well, off we go. It's there perhaps.'

The day came abruptly. Mount Kemmel smoked on all its sides like a coal-mine. They were on a road lined with willows that were already touched by spring, their luscious, friendly buds opening out. Bullets burst against the branches. The skin of the grass was wounded. The pool disappeared softly. They watched it move away

into the holes and then force itself into the earth. Flights of shells passed by, fought, jumped, tore off branches, roared into the earth, wallowed in the mud, then turned like spinning-tops and stayed there. They took a shovel and dug from hole to hole. The pool that was trying to escape kept splashing their legs. It ran haphazardly in one direction then another. They pushed it back, knocked at it, but it came back moaning. A shell landed near to them. They lay down in the pool and all at once it started licking the men from their knees to their faces with its cold tongue. The windmill was three hundred yards ahead. A little to the left, there was a small pile of stones. It was a pigeon-house.

'There's one of them!' Jolivet shouted.

They had just seen a man in the pile of stones. He was standing up, visible to the waist.

'Give me a gun quick, I'll get him!'

Jolivet fired, but missed. They could still see the man standing up. Jolivet was about to fire again when the enemy attacked with rockets, as though they were throwing handfuls of leaves. Jolivet didn't shout. He raised his hand to his forehead just as his helmet flew off, then he fell in the direction of the pile of stones. The young officer, Grivello, sprang forward like a cat. He stayed doubled up a moment, then stood up straight.

'Get down!' He was shattered by a blast in the belly. He opened out his arms like wings, they were red with blood. Flachat sprawled in a hole, his guts flowing from him like wet linen.

'There!' He touched his side. 'Look!'

Charmolle vomited blood and wine. He took two steps, then stopped to see what was running from his mouth. Gun-shots followed him.

'The captain? The captain?' It was the major's liaison officer.

'Attack! Attack! Tell them to attack!'

Two English soldiers made rabbit jumps towards the hop-fields. One rolled up into a ball and didn't move. The other ran on.

'Lieutenant Reynaud, it's me who commands. The captain's been killed!'

The liaison officer didn't move. He was crouched down, clutching a brandy flask in the vice of his legs and fists. There was a hole in his head. A long thread of froth and blood hung from his mouth. Oliver threw the grenade.

'Get down!'

Two machine-guns tore into the men and the ground with their claws.

'Forward!'

The lieutenant ran, bent double. He jammed his head into the ground. After a moment, he twisted round and lay out, face to the sky, mouth open. The corporal moved along on his knees.

'You, who are you?'

'Barnous!'

'Right, I'm in charge. And you, who are you?' He jabbed the men's equipment. 'Those guys down there in the hole, get them moving!'

'They're dead.'

'Forward!'

Oliver didn't budge. The machine-gun worked non-stop at his side. There was a moment of calm, then the wind carried a series of cries and revolver shots. The remains of the Hundred-and-fortieth attacked on the right. There was a tuft of grass ahead. Sticking his fists

into the ground, Oliver edged himself towards it. He saw a man stretched out, his back up like a mountain. 'La Poule?'

The man didn't breathe. He was too high above ground, he must be dead. Oliver crawled into the shelter of this body and tugged at the great-coat. Yes, he was dead. The man fell back on him and discharged a clot of blood. It was the corporal. His beard had already become a part of the earth. Oliver crawled on. He pushed his hand into a chunk of cold meat. The captain! A wave of nausea swept over Oliver. He bit his hand. 'Boys!' he had said.

'Hey!' a man called out. Standing up in the field, he looked tall enough to touch the sky.

'Chabrand! Get up, it's finished.'

Oliver stood up slowly and looked around. 'What? It's finished.' He was on his feet next to La Poule. Another man came striding over the corpses. It was Barnous.

Yes, it was finished. A great calm. No more noise. All of a sudden there was so much silence that they heard the smoke drifting.

'What's the situation?' Oliver asked.

'Look,' Barnous said. He pointed to the ground where they were, then to the crest of Kemmel. It rocked gently in the sky under its weight of corpses. There were only three survivors. Below, in the valley, men in grey were running through the grass.

'They're attacking!'

They attacked without barrage, without machine-guns, without shooting. All the ground was swept clean before them. Nothing but the dead, torn-up earth, villages on fire. A horse, all entangled in its reins, had gone crazy and danced in a meadow. The enemy trickled out of holes and emerged from the valleys on to the large unfurling plain that goes towards Bailleul.

'To the road!' La Poule shouted.

The smoke from the fires spread out along the ground. A French soldier without his equipment came running out of the smoke. A torrent of little burning coals sizzled through the thick air.

'Barnous!'

'Chabrand!'

They jumped from hole to hole. Two hundred yards behind them, the first wave of grey men advanced through the grass. They were tired. Their guns weighed down their arms. They entered the village.

'To the road,' Barnous shouted, 'we're saved.'

The road was a hundred yards ahead, decked out with trees and curving from a thicket towards a farm on the right. The rain fell gently. Four aeroplanes with black crosses emerged from the clouds. They came down like sparrows almost scraping the surface of the ground with their bellies. The sound of their machine-gun fire was like the clicking of a bird's beak.

'Let's breathe,' Le Poule said.

A frightful blast tore apart the hedge in front of them. They moved on. They came across an English battery. All around were wheels, fragments of tubes, empty cartridge-cases, shells like caterpillar cocoons, disembowelled horses with twisted necks, men with their faces in the earth, black faces biting the sky, a leg, flesh in pulp, the brains of a man on the rim of a wheel. In the midst of all this a cannon fired. Two artillery men, bare to the waist, were using it. They walked over the corpse of the officer, crushing his face with their boots

in order to pick up the shell. The shell exploded near the battery, they didn't hear it come. Barnous lowered his head, tried to touch it with his hand, but reached no higher than his shoulder. He collapsed over Oliver. A jet of blood squirted out of his cracked head.

'To the road!'

The road was like a dead stream. It was covered by rotting wagons, mutilated horses and men, trench-cannons, machine-guns, torn sheet-iron, casks of beer, packets of biscuits, sugar-loaves, sacks of tobacco.

'Cross the fields!'

Twice already Oliver had stopped running to look at his feet. What was that running between his legs? And everywhere in the meadow, under the grass, like dew, and leaving such a trail behind! Rats! Waves of rats! Rats from all those burning walls, from all those disembowelled barns, rats from destroyed villages, rats from the battle and from the corpses, rendered up into a black wave by the upheaval of the ground. They came out of the meadow below, overran the slope, and poured through the hollows of the tilled land like shining pitch.

A driverless cart bounded crazily across the ground. The two white galloping horses had shaken loose the bridle. The cart leaned over, its rails brushed the grass. It slanted over on its left side and finally fell back in an explosion of earth and water. Its wheels kept spinning round at full speed in the air. Stretched out between the shafts the two horses continued galloping over the sky, crushing it with their hooves.

'Hey!' La Poule shouted, holding up his arms.

They stopped running. It sounded as though the earth had collided with the sky. A fearsome tree of smoke and fire threw the immense shadow of its foliage over the men. The English battery had just exploded. Below, behind them, the Germans poured out of the village. A cloud, like a hand, danced above, with all its fingers spread out. It shook its fist at tufts of sky and tore them apart. Rockets fell like stars.

'To the left! To the left!' Oliver shouted.

In front of them, three heavy horses trotted in the grass. They were plough-horses which had escaped. A small mare, bare and shining, pranced before its foal. It saw the men and waited for them. It came up to La Poule, tossing its head merrily. The foal skipped around Oliver. Animals had broken loose from all the destroyed farms. They were grouped together at the edge of the thickets, or under the willows, or in the trees. La Poule, Oliver, mare and foal and the three plough-horses started trotting along the left side of the fields. Then all the other animals rose up and ran towards the two men.

'Forward! Forward! You're all right?'

'Yes.'

A bunch of time-shells tore through the clouds. Oliver shouted at the foal, grabbed hold of its head and pulled it down to the ground with him.

'All right! Forward!'

A large farm formed the crest of the meadow slopes. La Poule, astride a big horse, set off towards the trees, in front of the sheep and goats. Oliver watched the foal. It dodged the reins and galloped towards the farm, mane dishevelled. Oliver ran behind it. The foal stayed there motionless, its four hooves planted in the grass, its body ready to spring. It looked at the ground and breathed heavily. Oliver advanced slowly. There was a

small porch-roof to the farm. The entire front was covered with wisteria. The door had been wrenched from its hinges. There was the frothy wool of a mattress in the doorway. A young woman was leaning against the wall, breasts in the air, her head split open by a big splinter of steel.

Oliver moved forward slowly, head down. The mare breathed and looked at a tuft of mint. There was a sow rummaging in the ground, tearing at something and eating. Its snout covered in blood. Oliver shouted. The sow raised its head, it was chewing meat. It looked at Oliver with its little red eyes, crumpled up its snout, and bared its teeth like a vicious dog. Oliver took another two steps forward. The mare tapped its foot in the grass. There was a naked, dead infant underneath the sow's foot. The sow had torn off a shoulder and eaten the chest. It leaned over the little belly which was still white. It bit into the belly, dug its teeth way in to swallow the child's guts. Oliver put his hand in his pocket without a sound. Trembling to the marrow of his bones he took out his big country knife, the knife for bread and cheese. With his fingers clenching the horn handle he stopped trembling. The sow watched him, took a step towards him and grunted. Oliver was silent. He gripped the knife. The sow advanced. He waited.

Suddenly he jumped at the beast and struck. The knife entered with one blow. The blood spurted through his clenched fingers. The sow jammed its head into his shoulders and knocked him over backwards, planting its teeth into his shoulder. He drew out the knife, and stabbed again and again into the neck as if he was digging. The flesh that he struck whined like burning coals on water. With all his strength he struck time after time into the sow's belly. He was blinded by blood, covered with blood, deafened by growls and snarls, but he kept on stabbing with all his force. His eyes were gummed up with blood. The mare pranced around them kicking up clouds of earth. At last, with both hands holding the knife, Oliver slit open the the sow's throat.

He lay stretched out on the ground, pumping his lungs full of air. Above, the sky was a scrap of blue, with an occasional whisp of cloud floating by. Peace! He stood up. The sow's gut and blood emptied into the ground. Oliver looked at the wisteria, the dead woman, the mare. He was covered in blood. He examined his shoulder. No harm other than a scratch. He called to the mare, who came over shaking and stopped in front of him. He seized hold of a fistful of mane and leaning on the animal, he left the courtyard and set off towards the meadows.

La Poule returned on a big black horse. Oliver went down the meadows leaning on the white mare.

'You're wounded?' La Poule shouted, lifting both his arms.

Oliver shook his head. He felt the good, quivering warmth of the mare against his side.

'I had a fight with a sow. It was eating a child.'

'Quickly,' La Poule said, 'we'll have to gallop. They've got past Remingelst. They're all over the place, all over!'

Fringes of fire ate into the day on three sides. High on their horses, Oliver and La Poule looked at the deserted countryside. A thick reddish smoke rose up from burning granges. Fields of beans capsized, looking

as though they were going to toss their loads of flowers into the canals and ditches. Osier-beds leaned over towards the ground. The crumbling houses of Steenvorde smoked and crackled. Beyond the small town a black wave of fugitives and beasts on the run coursed through the rolling fields. A plane spun round out of control. delved through the clouds and fell with twisted wings into the willow-grove. Big shells ransacked a black meadow on the right. The steeple of Steenvorde collapsed, the clock chimed as it bounced in the debris.

'Gallop!'

Lying flat on their horses, they let themselves be carried through the trees, the fire, the eruptions of the ground. They abandoned the horses before Steenvorde.

Oliver had left blood on the white mare. 'Go on, little one' he said, patting its rump.

The mare ran off with the foal, followed by the big horse. Two sheep hidden in the hedges trotted behind the animals. Oliver and La Poule walked straight ahead through the meadow, towards the little hump of Mount Cassel. The Germans were still far away behind Steenvorde. Here the ground was wide open, naked. A parish priest crossed the road carrying a clock. An English cannon was drawn past at a gallop, the horses whipped by French artillery soldiers. Bareheaded and with no greatcoat, a colonel leaped through the grass. He held an open tin of sardines in his left hand. With his right he soaked the bread in the oil and stuffed it into his mouth. An English soldier, leaning behind a tree, lit his pipe in its shelter. They all went towards Mount Cassel. Oliver and La Poule were weighed down by the heavy afternoon heat. The Germans advanced over the stretch of ground without giving battle. There was no more noise, except the heavy rolling of hordes of men marching through the trees, across the grass and stones.

'This time we've had it,' La Poule said.

Oliver smiled wanly. 'So much the better. Just let it finish . . . .'

And suddenly, ahead of them, while the trees fanned out under the sinewy red smoke dispersed between sky and earth, everything started rattling and cracking.

'Get into extended line at the left!'

Fresh, rosy, brand-new alpine riflemen deployed in a roar of iron as they emerged from the hop-fields. Their bayonets were fixed. Without any sacks, they marched lightly, lifting high their legs in the damp grass. Bunches of grenades hung from their belts.

'Towards the left, in line!'

Another wave of soldiers rolled through the fields. Infantrymen in blue spilled out of all the thickets. Oliver held up his two bare arms. An English battery, a hundred yards wide, advanced at the gallop. Everything was new. Men, cannons, and horses whose brushed coats shone like oil. A bunch of red aeroplanes dissolved behind Cassel and dived into the smoke. Lancers with turbans and flowing scarves galloped, their clothes rustling.

'This is it!' La Poule said, clenching his teeth.

'Towards the left, in line!'

Alpine infantry churned out of thickets in massive columns. As they reached the fields they opened up automatically and, thus deployed, they advanced raking up everything in front of them.

'Towards the left, in line!'

'In extended order!'

'Battery! Battery!'

'Forward!'

'If you think it's going to finish,' La Poule said.

Seated on a dung-heap, a Scotsman played the bagpipes.

'What regiment?' one of the riflemen asked as he passed Oliver.

'The Hundred-and-fortieth.'

'Many dead?'

'Everybody . . . .'

Fife-players marched backwards before an English regiment. They played a slow, bitter tune behind the poplars. The music touched the soldiers right in their guts, where their equipment straps crossed, and pulled them forward. They marched, heavy as oxen, heads low, looking at their knees. But the music soon quickened their pace. The fife-players dodged aside to let the herd pass and followed behind. A drum rolled, regular as flowing water. There was a shattering call of bugles behind the walls of a farm. Blasts of horns sent a squadron of Belgians with long greatcoats running from a tilled field. The sound of cavalry trumpets passed by at great speed on the other side of the trees. The horses whinnied. Oliver's white mare, crazy and free, galloped behind the dragoons. The batteries were fanned out as far as the eye could see, hidden by trees and farms right up to the edge of the plain. The English infantry rose up like a thick, muddy stream, and the blue troop of French soldiers slipped over the crest of the grasslands, towards the hills and smoke.

'To the slaughterhouse!' La Poule said.

On the horizon, machine-guns began sizzling like oil in a frying-pan.



Julia leaned against the Gardettes's door, not daring to go in. There was a light in the bedroom from which a long moan came, which grew more piercing as it continued. Julia pulled herself together and entered the house abruptly. She held her hand out in greeting, but also in defence against Oliver who stood up suddenly, knocking over a chair.

'Calm yourself,' Julia said. 'There has to be an end to it. Joseph had more sense than you. "Go there," he said, "and get it over with!"'

'It's too late,' Oliver said, between clenched teeth.

The wail of pain trickled down the stairs.

'Listen,' Julia said, 'it's isn't too late. Let me . . . .'

'Come in, Julia,' her grandfather said. 'The cauldron's down there, and here's the salt. Fix everything as if you were at home. And you, my boy, sit down. Leave her alone, she's right. It shouldn't have been up to Joseph to make the first move. You should have done it. The truth is we've never had anything against the Chabrands. Sit down!'

'Thank you, father,' Julia said.

She fixed the cauldron on the lowest hook then piled the fire with dry silkworm heather. The flames leaped up.

'Go upstairs for a minute,' the father said. 'See how

it's coming on. I've got to set up the trap for the fox. I heard a yelp a while ago.'

'About another hour,' Julia said when she came down, 'and it's going well, she's plucky.'

'So, I'll hurry off,' the father said.

On the other side of the hearth, under the window which was open to the summer night, a child slept in a basket. Her big head weighted down the pillow. She had thrown back the covers. Two spindly legs hung from the basket, dead legs. Oliver looked at those legs.

'That one,' he said, 'she'll always carry the mark!'

'The mark of the times,' Julia said, kneeling down in front of the fire.

'The mark of your wickedness,' Oliver said.

Julia stood up. She let her hands drop to her sides, in the weary gesture of somebody struggling against fate.

'It wasn't me,' she murmured.

Oliver looked silently at the child's legs. 'I know, Julia,' he said. 'She told me . . . I know you did it with a good heart, you wanted to help. But you helped in the wrong way, that's all.'

'What was there to do, Oliver? We all felt so helpless. And who wrote you the letter?'

Oliver turned towards Julia and looked at her steadily. She stood before him as though waiting for him to pronounce judgment.

'I thank you, Julia . . . .'

The only sound was the water bubbling in the cauldron.

'Look, Julia.'

He held his right hand out towards her and opened it. Only three of his fingers remained. Thumb, index and little. The middle of the hand was crushed to pulp, as if a plough had driven over it.

'The evening at Kemmel!' he said. 'You don't know about this. Nobody does. I'm going to tell you. There were two of us. It had all started again. In the dark we saw a light under an overturned cart. They'd stretched a tent canvas between the wheels, and the light was underneath. We went near. We heard people talking. "So, how are things at home?" "Not too good. I've just got a letter. The kid has measles, the wife isn't too well either and she has to go out cleaning." "Here, have a drink. Things will get better." Well, I looked through the canvas flap. There was only one guy inside there. He talked out his troubles all alone. He was drinking . . .' Oliver held up his lonely index finger. 'He was fighting his own fight. But the other fight had begun again around us. It wasn't ours, it wasn't his or mine. Nobody's! Now, listen, Julia, listen well. Oh, it happened quite naturally, there wasn't any drama. It was as though it was destined to happen. I was walking in the night with another guy, La Poule. I had your letter and I told him: "She's pregnant and she's in awful pain. It's my sister-in-law who wrote to me. Like the guy down there, under the cart." So, listen, I'm going to tell you, you'll be the only one to know. Look at my hand. I got into a shell hole. La Paule got into another hole about ten yards away. He had a gun. Me, I lit the lighter to burn the letter. I lifted my hand with the lighter above the hole and he shot . . . .'

'Oh, God!'

'He had to,' Oliver said. 'For everybody's safety.'

'Look,' the father said, coming in, 'this is what he left behind.' He threw a fox's paw on the table.

'That's where the trap got him. He broke the bone with his teeth. That set him free. It takes courage!'

On the bare kitchen table Julia prepared a pile of thick salt, white, dry, alive in its dryness and essence. They'll wash the new infant with it soon. Oliver looked at it. One day, a pile of salt in front of him like that had represented all that remained of a man . . . .

'Do the Chabrands still live here?' a voice asked at the door.

'They still do,' the father replied, turning round abruptly. 'They still do. Where's he from, this fellow?'

A man entered. He took off his hat. 'This fellow,' he said, 'isn't from this part of the world, but he remembers the Chabrands. Good evening to you all!' He lifted his hand in greeting.

'It's a shepherd,' the father said, seeing the rolled-up cloak and the big staff.

'No,' the man said, 'not a shepherd, it's the shepherd.'

The father's gaze sharpened under his eyebrows. 'Thomas! I recognize you.'

'Yes, it's me,' Thomas said, 'in the flesh. Didn't you recognize me in this handsome jacket?'

'No, Thomas. Sit down, put your things aside. Make yourself at home. No, it wasn't the handsome jacket that made me forget. It's just that so much time has gone by since we met. But, to be sure, I've been waiting for you since the end of the war. Even last year, when the herds were going up, I said to myself: "If Thomas is still alive, he'll come back to fetch his ram." When you didn't, I thought that you were dead.'

'No, I'm not dead,' the shepherd said, 'I can't die at Crau.' He was silent for a moment, wiping the dust gently, with the tip of his gnarled hand, from the blue fur of his clean jacket.

'That's why I've come up. For the last time.'

'The last time this year,' the father said smiling.

'The last time, Chabrand,' the shepherd said. 'No more legs, no more breath, words I can't remember, losing control, like dead rain. I told the master: "Truth is I'd appreciate your kindness. Let me go up the mountain." He told me, "You'll be looked after here." Then he understood. "All right, Thomas, up you go," And he touched my hand. I said good-bye to the girl, to the lady, to the child. I caught up with the herd at Salon. And here I am!'

'Paying, dying, there's time,' the father said.

'There's not always time to die clean,' the shepherd said. 'You have to take advantage of the best moment.'

'Julia, since you're the hostess this evening, hand the glasses round. The bottle's in the cupboard on the right.'

The three of them stood up.

'A fine man!' the shepherd said, putting his hand on Oliver's shoulder. Julia handed round the glasses. She filled the shepherd's first, the father's next, then Oliver's. The brandy shook in their hands.

'To friendship!' the father said.

The shepherd looked around him, at Julia, Oliver, and the basket where the child lay. 'You know, it's a full house here!'

'That doesn't mean we haven't suffered,' the father said.

'Chabrand, we make life out of blood!'

A loud scream came from the bedroom. A thorn of

a shriek, sharp enough to pierce the whole world.

'Isn't that your daughter-in-law?' the shepherd asked, pointing to Julia.

'No, mine's upstairs, she's in labour.'

'I thought so. A moan like that, grandfather, I know it. It's the scream of hope. Don't pay any attention. Sometimes I say things like that. People think I'm mad.' He turned towards Oliver. 'My boy,' he said, 'if that's a girl I see over there, I hope you'll have a son in a little while, like you, no more, no less. That's something you can build on.'

'Julia, Julia!' the mother shouted on the stairs, 'come up quickly. It's time.'

'Come on, you,' the father said, taking Oliver by the shoulders. 'Come on shepherd, we'll go look at your ram while we wait!'

They opened the door to the shed. Oliver lifted up the lantern.

'Arlatan!' the shepherd called.

And immediately the ram answered to that voice with its husky song of love. From the middle of the glowing shadow where the fumes of rotten leaves and wool-grease danced, they saw the animal approach on timid steps up to the edge of the light. The light shone on the woollen tempest of red hair. It focused on that sea-like whirling of the large horns. The animal was there, swimming through the semi-darkness as though through moving encircling sea.

The shepherd slowly went down on his knees in the straw. 'I've found you again,' he said softly. 'Come on, my little one, come on. Oh, you're as handsome as the day, my curly friend from Arles! Oh, you who frightened the herds of tunny fish when I led you out to graze salt on the beaches. You're the shining sun! If you came out now from your bath in the sea they'd shout: "Here's the one who comes from Egypt!"'

The ram drew near. It turned its head to move its horns out of the way, then lay its muzzle on the shepherd's neck. It breathed heavily, snorting every now and then for joy.

'You took good care of him,' the shepherd said.

'Thanks,' the father said.

'Better than I did.'

'No, not better than you. He's an affectionate animal. Look at his family all round. He must have been waiting for you. He has left us four ewes as a farewell gift.'

The shepherd stood up. 'Chabrand, there, in your straw with my ram against me, I felt a cold touch of death. You remember the time when I left you? I remember, because I'm branded with the memory. You thanked me for showing you the pity in me. You remember, father? You thought I was hard. And I thought I was doing the right thing. We're always too frightened of showing our pity. That's the sad truth. We should never lead the herd out to the slaughter, as I did, on the roads. Better abjure mankind than that. Oh, let it be . . . .'

A confusion of joyful shouts coming from the house stirred the leaves. The mother opened the window and called out to them. They also heard the small, hale voice of Madeleine calling from the bedroom.

'It's happened,' the father said.

He called out to the women across the night. 'Healthy?'

'And handsome!'

'I'll be on my way now,' the shepherd said, 'and leave you to your joy.'

'Stay, shepherd,' Oliver said. 'It's me, the child's father who's asking you. We had misfortune to begin with. The little girl you saw doesn't have any life in her legs. This time perhaps happiness is going to enter the house. Stay, you'll give what you know.'

'Willingly.'

Julia was at the doorway. She carried something in her apron.

'What is it?' the father and Oliver asked together.

'A big boy.'

'Let's see.'

She pulled her apron wide open. The child was inside, stretched out naked on a handful of grass. The father put his hand on that young, new flesh with its creases full of blood. He put his fingers round the fig between the legs.

'Yes, he's a man all right, he's got everything.'

The ram moved forward to acknowledge the child.

'Let him,' the shepherd said. 'It's a good sign for births when animals are there. One more animal on the earth. So, my boy, you want me to give you the shepherd's gifts?'

'Yes,' Oliver said. 'Give them to him. Let's have all the luck we can on our side.'

The shepherd cradled the infant in his arms. He blew on the little one's mouth. 'The green of the grass,' he said. He breathed on the little one's right ear. 'The noises of the world,' he said. He breathed on the little one's eyes. 'The sun,' he said, then he turned to the ram. 'Come here,' he said. 'Breathe on this little man so that he'll become like you, one who leads, one who goes in front, not one who follows. And now, my little one, it's my turn. Child, I've been the leader of animals all my life. By the graciousness of your father, I've come to search for you, at the edge of the herd just when you're about to enter the big herd of men. I've come to give you blessings. And first of all I tell you that here is the night, there are the trees, there are the animals. Soon you'll see the day. You know everything. And I add, if God listens to me, it'll be given to you to love slowly, slowly in all your loves, like one who holds the arms of the plough and goes a little deeper each day. You'll never let tears fall from your eyes, but, like the vine, they'll come from a place carved out by fate. And that will spread life out under your feet for you, it'll give you moss on your chest and health all around. You'll make your way with the breadth of your shoulders. It'll make you always ready to carry other people's burdens. You'll stand on the edge of the road like a fountain. And you'll love the stars.'

'So be it,' said the father softly.

The shepherd lifted the infant up above his head. The ram bellowed towards the horizon from between its big, branched horns. And as if stirred by this rumble of love, the night sky lit up.

'Saint John! Saint John!' Julia shouted, 'Look!'

The shepherd's star rose in the night.

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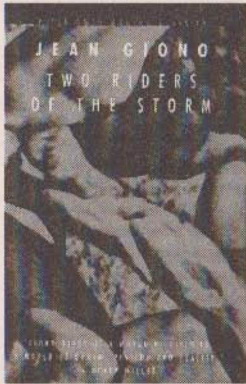


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