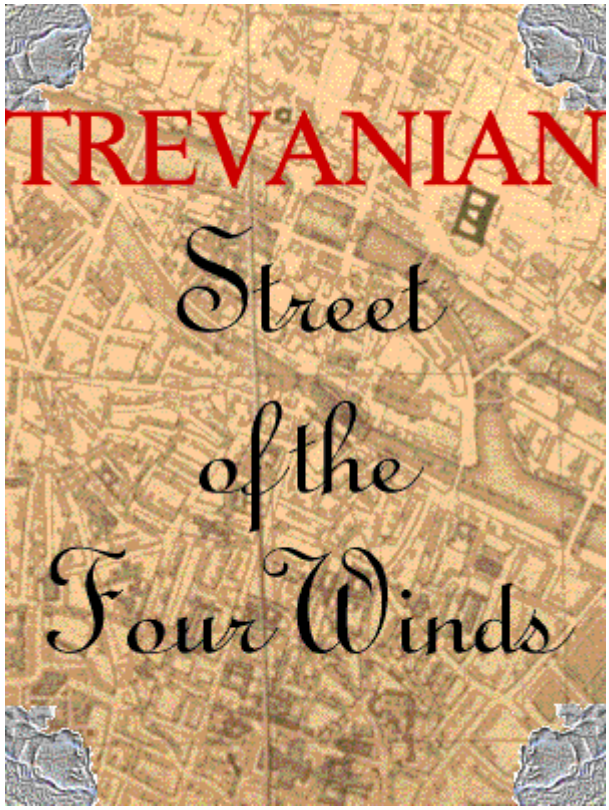

PART I

INTERNET EDITION

The Street of the Four Winds – Part I Internet Edition
By Trevanian

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In ***Street of the Four Winds***, **Trevanian** has created a bold, witty, tragic-comic Victorian novel, teeming with action and filled with young artists and revolutionaries who have bound themselves into a protective family of social outsiders against the indifferent domination of the mercantile masses.

It follows the humorous fortunes and tragic misfortunes of youth at a hectic pace through the year of 1848. Using elements from his various writing personae, **Trevanian** has merged the bawdy wit of Nicholas Seare, Arnaud LeCagot's affectionate understanding of the Basque character, and his own meticulous research into conditions and practices in Paris in the middle of the 19th century to produce a fast-paced, panoramic vision of the Bohemian ideal colliding with humanized representatives of those political and economic themes that have always lurked in the background of a **Trevanian** novel.

Showing a mastery of story-telling techniques and in complete control of the difficult form, ***Street of the Four Winds*** deals with the struggle for recognition, the need for friendship and love, and the pain of failure and loss...themes familiar to those readers of Hugo, Balzac and the rest, but **Trevanian's** heroes and heroines also confront such modern enemies as monopolistic corruption, institutionalized poverty, endemic injustice and the beginnings of what we now call 'The System'.

Stylistically anti-modern, **Trevanian's** broad-canvas novel is a rare treat, an utterly absorbing universal tale, filled with wit and charm, that carries us back to that marvellous exuberant time in youth when there was everything to be played for in life, and when almost everything can be suffered for friends and first loves.

Although a worldwide best seller, **Trevanian** (here captured by the artist's brushes of DB) has jealousy guarded his privacy for 30 years, having never done a book signing, given a live interview or made a television appearance. In spite of much speculation, his precise identity remains one of the publishing world's most enduring enigmas.

Trevanian lore has him as an American ex-academic who did not like the way America was going and who left for Europe. He created the phenomenon of the worldwide best seller in the seventies with two intelligent and entertaining spy novels (that he always maintained were spoofs of the genre), *The Eiger Sanction* and *The Loo Sanction*. He later took the genre more seriously and created perhaps the most potent superspy in literature, Nicholas Hel, in his remarkable, dense novel *Shibumi*, having treated us to a moody Montreal policier, *The Main,* before it. After *Shibumi*, he shifted ground again by writing a delicate psychologial horror story, *The Summer of Katya,* set in his beloved Basque country in that glorious summer before the Great War.

After an absence of 15 years he returned to prominence in the US with an edgy *fin de siècle* Western, *Incident at 20-Mile* which, in spite of his long absence and the zero publicity given it, reached eleven on the bestseller lists. The New York Times called it, 'one of the three or four best westerns ever written.'

Trevanian's writing styles have been compared to Balzac, Poe, Simenon, W. Somerset Maugham, Kawabata Yasunari, Boccacio and Zola. Answering written questions from time to time, **Trevanian** has explained why his books are so different, and incidentally, why his identity remains a puzzle. He conceives a story and then creates the character of an author to tell it. He has never wanted to find a niche in a genre and then go on and on mining it. One thing that does remain in the background of all his books is an old-fashioned liberal conscience slyly unveiling the horrors of economic slavery, social bigotry and injustice, and the rapacious greed of modern capitalism and the politicians who feed from the same trough.

Dedication

Street of the Four Winds is dedicated to those doggedly non-conforming young 'Bohemians' of all generations: the outcasts, the outsiders, the idealists, the dream-merchants who inhabit a twilight band on the edge of Establishment Art, some marching to the beat of a different drummer, some in search of a drummer, and some in the certain knowledge that they are the drummer.

And to the principal architects of the evergreen Bohemian myth that has inspired and inflamed generation after generation of the young: Balzac, Dumas, G. DuMaurier, Hugo, the Goncourts, Maupassant, Murger, Prévert/Carné, Sand, and Zola.

And to the patience, talent, and tact of Alexandra who gave generously of her own valuable writing time to edit this book, casting light into its more obscure corners, and clearing out much cherished rubbish.

Chapter One
Paris Welcomes a Young Artist

Dusty, rumpled, bruised, stiff, and hungry, Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde descended from the Bordeaux-Paris diligence without the luggage that had mysteriously disappeared piece by piece along the way, without an astonishing proportion of the money that was to have sustained him during his first months in Paris, without a single friend in this noisy, noisome city, and without the vaguest notion of how to find the Garnier Academy of Art where he was to begin, that very day, the instruction that would constitute the first step on his long, difficult, but—he was confident—inevitably victorious march to glory and riches.

Jean-Baptiste pressed into a protective niche near the entrance of the Lafitte-Caillard depot, half-deafened by the noise, half-dazed by the bustle, but wholly delighted by the chaos and colour of the great city that swarmed past him. Paris! At last! The street was clogged with snarling, angry traffic; rumbling goods waggons heaped to toppling; cumbersome coal drays, their splay-hooved draft horses snorting under the whip; utilitarian broughams, fashionable fiacres, regal phaetons, sleek calèches, and fragile cabriolets with their pampered thoroughbreds prancing skittishly as their glistening flanks shuddered with nervous energy. Disreputable old carioles took advantage of their battered condition to bully their way past expensive landaus which winced aside to avoid a scarring collision; pushcarts and barrows of every description, burdened with every imaginable stock and product, threaded their vulnerable ways amongst crushing wheels and trampling hooves, their principal defense being the succulent curses and vicious threats spewed out by the mongers who propelled them. The greatest enemies of these pushcart men were the new-fangled 'omnibuses', those democratic machines of public transport whose fearless coachmen vied with one another in devil-may-care audacity and heart-stopping dexterity to the shrieking delight of the younger of their customers, and the white-knuckled panic of the older. Omnibus drivers were famous for their ability to thread through traffic so narrowly that, according to popular wisdom, their coaches were given only one coat of varnish because two would make them too wide.

Ground between this multitude of wheels and the ancient paving stones was the eternal slush of Paris, a viscous, gluey composite of mud, garbage and excrement that oozed towards the gutters, where it became an accursed obstacle for pedestrians and a profitable employment for the army of rascally, ragged gamins who offered plank-bridge services to well-dressed citizens, over-charging those who accepted their service and heaping upon those who declined a full ration of that physiologically precise and scatologically inventive abuse

for which they were justly famous. The city left the responsibility for removing this slime and sewage to such natural forces as rain, biological decomposition, and the tug of gravity which carried the muck towards the Seine at the unhurried pace of an old glacier, several meters per year.

The five narrow streets that met at this busy carrefour contributed endless streams of people and vehicles to the swarming stew. Ragged children dodged between legs of irate peddlers, dodging their kicks and ignoring their threats. Adroit messengers and shop assistants threaded through the traffic, their feet often within centimetres of draft horses' hooves, their chests brushing against the sides of passing waggons, as they paid back, with interest, the invective of the drivers.

The eyes and ears of the new arrival from the South absorbed the city's heady medley of motion and noise, and he fell instantly and totally in love with Paris. (The reader will learn that Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde possesses an astonishing capacity for falling in love instantly and totally.) It was September of 1846, so the Paris that captured the young Basque's heart at first sight was the Paris of Villon, d'Artagnon, and Balzac, as yet neither tamed nor blemished by the heavy Alsatian hand of Baron Haussmann who was soon to begin slicing wide cañons through the ancient streets to create anonymous, geometric boulevards down which cannon fire could sweep to punish the rabble for complaining about their hunger. Old Paris was random-built, whimsical, approachable, idiosyncratic, charming, mysterious. But it was also, it must be confessed, unsanitary, decrepit, inconvenient, labyrinthine and dangerous. The railroads, still a novelty that many confidently predicted would not last, had not yet encrusted its buildings with soot or created its sprawling, monotonous banlieues. Old Paris was a collection of discrete quartiers, a cluster of faubourgs each with its own melody, its own rhythm, its own timbre. Then, as now, the native-born Parisian artist was as rare as the compassionate banker or the honest politician. Most young aspirants to glory arrived in the great City of Opportunity after long journeys on swaying, bone-jolting diligences, travelling, for lack of funds, à l'Impériale, which is to say, riding atop the coach, perched upon the luggage, his arms numb and his fingers weak with clinging for dear life as the diligence lurched over rutted roadways, alternately choking with dust and drenched by rain, freezing through bitter nights and broiling under relentless afternoon suns, shifting his weight this way and that in a democratic effort to distribute the bruises fairly over his bottom, over-charged by roguish innkeepers for thin soup, stale bread, and lousy accommodations. Yes, yes, but what an adventure! All his young life the artist had dreamt of going to Paris where wealth, glory, and applause awaited him, together with the excitement of new ideas, the thrill of novel experiences, the comradeship of fellow artists, and perhaps…romance.

In obedience to the traditional rituals of passage from the provinces to the metropolis and the mythic rites of passage from innocent youth to world-wise

manhood, Jean-Baptiste had been delayed, cheated, and ridiculed at every stage of the nine-day journey from his village in the Pyrénées. Coach drivers and innkeepers had treated him like a gullible rustic, an understandable, if not forgivable, error, considering his outmoded clothes, his provincial accent, his old-fashioned manners, his stiff dignity, and the round-eyed wonder he was seldom able to conceal. No doubt the fleecers and scoffers would have behaved with greater deference had they known that the object of their ridicule and chicanery had recently won a competition among artists of his province, which victory had persuaded his family to provide him with minimal support for three years of study in Paris. Furthermore, he had been the star pupil of M. Hector Hastoy, senior drawing master of the Bayonne School of the Fine Arts, and a man who had twice been to Paris and whose voyages to Bordeaux were beyond counting. But Jean-Baptiste had chosen not to embarrass the scoffers with revelations of who he was and what potent connections he enjoyed, for he had vowed to gain success and fame wholly through his own merits. If his decision to conquer Paris armed only with energy and talent seems rash, we must bear in mind that the Basque psyche is characterized by an exuberant confidence that outsiders sometimes mistake for cockiness, and an ingrained abhorrence of false modesty that the foreigner often confuses with braggadocio. Jean-Baptiste had been protected from the worst excesses of ridicule and theft by a prickly Basque pride that brought him to his feet, ready to battle any number of opponents, and with any weapons they might choose, at the slightest trespass on his dignity.

The reader might assume that this rumpled, travel-stained young man of nineteen wedged into the shallow niche to avoid being dragged along by the current of humanity that flowed past him would be humbled by the prospect of making his way to success against the Paris's famous blend of aggression and indifference. But Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde experienced no such trepidation. True, he had little money, no friends, and only such knowledge of the harsh realities of this world as one gains from three-volume romantic novels; but consider his advantages! Youth. Confidence in his talent. Hunger for life. Blind faith in the inevitable justice of Fate. Willingness to work and suffer for his art. And—above all and protecting all—his unassailable Basque pride.

In addition to these largely spiritual gifts, he arrived in Paris with a new leather painting case that his aunts had purchased by pooling coins they had long hoarded at the bottom of flour canisters, where no thief would ever think of looking—except, of course the experienced. What a tingle had run down his spine when he first opened the case to discover an assortment of new brushes, neatly-labelled bottles of spirits and oil, pots of pigment arranged in exact chromatic order. Who could fail to paint brilliant pictures with such equipment as this? Throughout the long, punishing journey, he had kept the treasured case either on his lap, or beneath his head when he slept, or pressed between his feet when he ate in roadside taverns. He had concealed its contents from fellow travellers so they would not realize that he was an artist on his way to fame and

riches in Paris while they, poor souls, were merely…well, whatever they merely were. Nor was his fine painting case the only treasure he brought with him to Paris. There was also a generous quantity of advice bestowed on him by his uncle, the Abbé de Lhande, who had taken over his education when he had been orphaned by a plague of cholera. The material details of his up-bringing had been in the hands of three hovering, bickering, solicitous maiden aunts, whose hopes that he might follow his uncle into the service of God were dashed when the lad's inclinations turned toward the artistic, rather than the spiritual.

Most of the pious advice given by his uncle on the eve of departure had been proscriptive, an extensive list of situations, persons and experiences the wise Christian should avoid, for it was the Abbé's view, not only that Mankind had fallen ever lower and lower since its ejection from the Garden, but that each individual was born bad and got progressively worse with the passage of time. When he came to the awkward subject of…ah…well…physical temptations, the Abbé spoke darkly of the snares awaiting a young man in Paris, that modern Sodom! In a voice trembling with outrage—even while his eyes were suffused with melancholy compassion that extended even to the lowest, foulest, most slimy and loathsome of God's creatures—he warned Jean-Baptiste against Women of Easy Virtue. And when the young man's vacant expression revealed that he failed to follow his uncle's thrust, the Abbé clarified by referring to them as Daughters of Joy, Odalisques, Messalinas. You know…Sisters of Darkness! Fireships! Sirens of Destruction! Although this catalogue failed to provide illumination, Jean-Baptiste concealed his ignorance by nodding gravely and saying, 'Ah yes! Yes, of course. Hm-m-m. Yes.'

It would be misleading to suggest that Jean-Baptiste was unaware of what his uncle termed ' the…well, the meatier aspects of human…ah…matters'. After all, he had been brought up in a rural culture where the fecundity of sheep was God's principal means of revealing which, among his biped flock, he considered deserving, and which not. Furthermore, he had not escaped the sniggeringly salacious (if often ballistically improbable) information that schoolboys exchange. So it was not lovemaking that he was ignorant of, it was the fact that love could be for sale. And even if he had known that poverty and despair could drive a woman to offer herself on the flesh market, he would have been at a loss to understand how she could find clients, for although his young body's longing for physical satisfaction was manifest in disturbing and often embarrassing dreams, he could not conceive of love-making without being in love. (It was not then generally known how warping three-volume romantic novels can be.) So it is understandable that no small part of his excitement at coming to Paris was due to his expectation that he would find both the spiritual inspiration and the physical gratification of…Love.

His heart buoyant, he stepped out of his safe niche to wander down the muddy thoroughfare of this Paris he had so long dreamt of. He smiled with undisguised affection upon each passer-by, feeling a warm bond of

camaraderie. After all, were they not all Parisians together? Brothers and sisters in this marvellous city of hope and opportunity? It must be confessed that his smile was seldom returned. Indeed most passers-by, intent upon their own troubles and goals, frowned at this oddly dressed rustic who stood blocking the flow of pedestrians, grinning like an idiot. But Paris' reputation for hospitality was rescued by several young women of gay and colourful aspect who returned the smiles of this strikingly handsome young man with the softly curling black hair, the dark almond-shaped Basque eyes, and the creamy cheeks with just a trace of down. One of these brightly clad women nodded to him and winked in an amicable way as she tilted her head in a quick gesture towards the doorway in which she lounged. But when he, eager to adopt Parisian customs, winked back and tilted his head in imitation of this strange urban idiom of greeting, she said something out of the side of her mouth to a colleague in the next doorway, and they both snorted with laughter.

One troubling observation clouded Jean-Baptiste's first radiant vision of Paris: among the satisfied countenances of the well-dressed, prosperous people, there were so many hungry, frightened faces. So many women with shuffling step and hollow eyes, so many gaunt men with lost, confused aspects, so many ragged children with furtive, feral glances. Were there no ordinary folk in Paris? Was everyone either wealthy or miserable? The hopelessness in these sallow faces brought a twist of compassion to his heart, but also the chill of a nameless fear. Who were these despised outcasts, these phantoms of despair?

During the farewell lecture his uncle had bestowed upon him in lieu of a crassly materialistic gift of money, mention had been made of the vile criminals that infest Paris: loafers, cut-purses, cheats, murders—and worse of all anarchists who were envious of the prosperity of others, and rapacious revolutionaries seeking to undermine the divine order of merit and reward. Jean-Baptiste wondered if these furtive, hunted people with their bruised eyes were the criminals, the cut-throats, the anarchists his uncle had warned him against. He would in time discover that this grim flotsam on the tide of economic success was infinitely more despised than mere criminals, with whose material goals—if not methods—the entrepreneurial bourgeois establishment could identify. These vile and despised creatures were…the Poor. They were…the 'Others'. The victims of a capitalism built upon cheap labour, the laws and customs of which were dictated by speculators, bankers, developers, and investors, who accepted the axiom that it takes a hundred poor men to make one rich man. These 'others' were the waste products of a remorseless upward struggle in which the comfortable strive to become rich, and the rich to become opulent. In economic counter flow, the system drives artisans downward to become the working poor, while the poor become destitute, and the destitute become drunks, scavengers, petty thieves, cheap whores, diseased madmen—the 'Others'.

As Jean-Baptiste pondered the anomaly of such wretchedness in the midst

of such wealth, an event occurred to remind him of his uncle's injunction that one must be ever vigilant in the evil city. A passer-by, presumably so confused by the bustle of the street that he mistook Jean-Baptiste's new painting case for his own, snatched it up from the doorway where he had left it for safekeeping. The fellow was already thirty meters away and hastening toward some pressing appointment when our Basque noticed the fellow's error and ran after him to rectify it. The passer-by, seeing himself pursued and assuming—as he subsequently explained—that he was being chased by one of the thieves with which Paris swarms, took to his heels, and he might have got quite away had not Jean-Baptiste's strong legs, bred to run along the mountain trails, caught up with the inadvertent culprit. And even then, the poor fellow was so frightened that Jean-Baptiste was obliged to grasp his collar and hold him firmly as he informed him of his mistake. They had a good laugh together over the mix-up, and it was not until the fellow had vanished into the crowd that it occurred to Jean-Baptiste that some scoundrel must have stolen this gentleman's painting case, the one so similar in appearance to his own. He shook his head and clicked his tongue. What a greenhorn that fellow was! Allowing his property to go adrift like that! One had to keep on one's toes in the big city. His uncle had instructed him that one must all times be cautious, punctual, disciplined—

Punctual! Oh, Good God! He was going to be late for his first class at the Garnier Academy! That would never do! His teachers and fellow students might doubt his devotion to work! If only he had not met so many delays along the road, he would have arrived in Paris three days earlier, in plenty of time to settle himself into the accommodations his former drawing master, M. Hastoy, had been kind enough to arrange for him at..at..(he pulled a slip of paper from the pocket of his antique plum-coloured frock coat)..at the Hôtel Grasse on the Street of the Four Winds. Indeed, he had assumed confidently that those three lost days would suffice for him to become familiar with his new surroundings, learn the customs of Paris, establish several firm and lasting friendships with fellow artists, and, who knows? perhaps even find the One and Eternal Love for which his romantic soul yearned. But now he would have to rush about at great sacrifice of dignity just to avoid being late for his first class!

He was baffled by the reluctance—nay, the impertinence!—he met each time he asked a passer-by for directions. Some strode doggedly on, ignoring his polite questions. Others told him to leave them alone or they would cry out for help. The next person he asked for directions was a ragged, flat-faced fellow who wore his cap at a rakish angle and who responded most rudely to the young artist's request for directions, telling him not only where he could go but what he could do with his Hôtel Grasse when he got there. His dignity touched to the raw, Jean-Baptiste drew himself up and offered to settle this matter in a manner befitting gentlemen. By way of response, he received only a sneer and a thoroughly rude gesture which caused Jean-Baptiste to favour the fellow with a blow to the cheek that spun his cap around. And when the scamp responded by

calling him something no Basque ever calls another, Jean-Baptiste chased him down the muddy street and would have caught him too, if the fellow had not dodged in front of an elegant tilbury, causing the horse to rear, to the discomfort of the two young dandies within, one of whom sought to mend Jean-Baptiste's manners with a taste of his whip, but the Basque leapt back and warned the gorgeously-dressed macaronies not to interfere in things that did not concern them. Nostrils quivering with haughty disdain, the driver informed him that it was not his habit to speak to persons of low rank, and he went on to offer a gratuitous insult concerning the Basque's plum-coloured frock coat with its tails so long they flapped against his calves. The driver's companion peered down through lorgnettes and simpered something about Jean-Baptiste's moss green pantaloons having been improved—ever so slightly—in colour and texture by the mud that passing carriages had spattered on them.

Jean-Baptiste offered to meet them, singly or both at once, at any place they chose and with any weapons they considered themselves competent to wield. The driver mockingly imitated the young artist's southern accent in a nasal singsong, while his companion fell on his shoulder, weak and whimpering with laughter. When Jean-Baptiste repeated his challenge, a tremor of fury in his voice, the driver lashed out with his whip, raising a welt on his shoulder. Then he flicked the reins and continued down the street.

The outraged Basque ran after them, shouting that he was prepared to settle the matter with bare fists, right then and there. But a cart carrying a load of hides was obliged to drop one wheel into a deep pot-hole to miss him, and he received the curses of the burly teamster, who seemed eager to substitute for the two dandies in any physical settlement proposed by this wet-nosed rustic. But at that instant Jean-Baptiste remembered that he had left his painting case on the curb, and he ran back, followed by the laughter of the teamster and the jeers of a knot of bystanders who felt cheated out of their entertainment.

The case was gone! All those neatly-aligned jars and pots, the brushes designed to create works that would rocket him into the pantheon of French painters and bring glory to his family and his native village! ..Gone!

But there was no time to lament his misfortune, for his chubby old-fashioned pocket watch informed him that he had less than an hour to arrive at the Garnier academy in time for his first lesson. Without his brushes and paints, he would be unable to display his talent, but he would at least be able to demonstrate his intention to work hard and be in every way an exemplary student.

Driven to extreme measures by necessity, he grasped the nearest passer-by by his neckcloth and refused to release him until he divulged the exact directions for the Hôtel Grasse on the Street of the Four Winds. Eyes bulging with fright, the poor draper's clerk babbled out general instructions while he trying keep his toupee in place without seeming to be raising an aggressive hand against this wild-eyed young man. Releasing him and apologetically rearrang-

ing the folds of his neckcloth, our young friend attempted to excuse what, he admitted, might have appeared to be excessive enthusiasm, but the wild-eyed clerk ran off screaming, 'Help! Assassin! Madman!' And Jean-Baptiste felt instinctively that prudence lay in fleeing in the opposite direction, lest he be obliged to squander what little time was left to him, making explanations to the authorities.

No sooner had he crossed to the left bank, than he found himself tangled in the maze of alleys, dead-ends, by-ways and narrow passages. Up one street…A blank wall! Down another…No way out! Good God, what time was it getting to be? Perhaps down this alley! No, wait a minute…I've passed this way before! Blundering into a closed courtyard strewn with garbage and slimy with mud—or what he earnestly hoped was mud—the panting, frustrated Basque turned round and round on his heel. Which of a half dozen narrow passageways would lead him out of this labyrinth? One thing was certain. He hated this Paris! Absolutely detested this unfriendly, filthy, thief-infested, foul, confusing—

'Could I offer a little guidance, young man?'

The voice behind him startled Jean-Baptiste. Where had he sprung from, this gaunt apparition with parchment skin stretched so tightly over his face that his sharp cheekbones threatened to burst through? His no-colour suit must have been made for a much shorter man, for his bony wrists dangled from the sleeves of the skimpy jacket, and a length of bluish shin separated the cuffs of the threadbare trousers from the curiously incongruous ballet slippers. But the most arresting—indeed, disturbing—aspect of this creature were his eyes which, through a caprice of nature, were split down the middle, each pale blue on one side and light brown on the other. Glittering from beneath a craggy ridge of brow, they seemed to drill into the very soul. …The eyes of a Christ-gone-mad.

'Offering guidance to the young is my vocation, young man. My calling, might you call it. I am a teacher, therefore I must teach. But wait! I am also a mentor. Does that mean I must "ment"? And what is meant by "menting"? Perhaps the word is merely a figment of my imagination. Ah, but look! If you pluck the succulent fig from that "figment", you are left with "ment". So it would seem that we have isolated the illusive "ment"! Rejoice, young man! Perhaps they will name it after us!'

'Ah-h…yes. Well…I am afraid, sir, that I am in a desperate hurry.'

'You're not only in a hurry, you're also in a quandary. And in a plum-coloured frockcoat as well. All of which prompts me to iterate: How may I help you?'

'I'm lost.'

'My dear young man, we are all lost—more or less. You more, I less. You see, it's not simple a matter of knowing where one is. No, no! One must also know where one came from and—most troubling of all—where one is going. You wonder where you are. Nothing easier, my son! You are…there.

While I, on the other hand, am (now watch closely)..here! Of course, from your point of view, it would appear that I am the one who is there while you are here. But that's just a distortion of reality caused by youthful egotism.'

'..Ah..yes... Well, I'm afraid I really must be going.'

'Whither?'

'I'm looking for the Street of the Four Winds.'

'But you're practically there, young master! That passage yonder leads to Street of the Four Winds. You can't miss it. ..Unless, of course, you are determined to do so.'

But Jean-Baptiste was reluctant to accept the directions of a man whose mind was obviously...well, adrift. 'You're quite sure it's just down there?'

'Sure? Of course I'm sure. They call me 'the Prophet". And we prophets are always sure. We're not always right, but we're always sure. ' He beamed a warm smile, and benediction softened his split blue/brown eyes. 'Go forth then, my child. Through that passage and turn left. You'll have no difficulty finding your way. It's waiting for you.'

The young Basque eyed the spectre uneasily. 'What is waiting for me?'

'Your future, of course. One's past cannot wait for one. It's already gone by. Flown downstream! Too late! Too late! Alas, my child, too late!'

With an mutter of thanks, Jean-Baptiste turned and walked towards the narrow passageway the peculiar fellow had pointed out with his long, bony finger. He turned back to ask the old man if he was quite sure that... But the courtyard was empty. The Prophet had disappeared.

With a blink then a shrug, the young man plunged into the stenchy passage which brought him out through a broken arch onto the narrow rue du Cœur Volant, down which he raced on with all the speed of his strong legs, heel-skidding around the corner, and running headlong into a piano.

A piano?

Yes, a piano. An auto-mobile piano with six legs, four of which were the conventional wooden underpinnings, while the other two were stouter, longer, and composed of a flexible substance wrapped in fabric. The collision sent the instrument crashing against the side of a building with a loud atonic twang and left it standing on its conventional legs, with the flexible ones stretched out behind. From beneath the piano came a muffled but angry voice, complaining that anyone so goddamned stupid as to run into something as big as a piano must be a blundering jackass who deserved to have his arse kicked with force and with frequency!

Bending low, Jean-Baptiste peered under the piano into the flushed, rage-contorted face of its porter, and asked if he had sustained any injury.

The man beneath closed his eyes and clenched his teeth to contain his fury as he slowly muttered an Ave Maria to prevent himself from saying other things.

'Are you hurt?' Jean-Baptiste repeated impatiently, consulting his brass

turnip of a watch again.

'Hurt? Hurt? Of course not!' the man pronounced with mountin g wrath. 'How could one be hurt by a little thing like a piano falling on one?'

'I'm sorry I ran into you,' Jean -Baptiste said, 'but I am not prepared to accept your sarcasm, for I don't hold myself to be responsible for your little accident.'

'Little?' the man asked from beneath the piano. 'My accident?'

'Well, after all, sir. Only a fool would walk about carrying a piano on his back, creating both a danger and a nuisance to honest pedestrians.'

'Oh, so I'm a nuisance, am I?'

'..And a danger.'

'A danger as well.'

'Yes. If you absolutely must express yourself musically while walking about the streets, I suggest you take up the flute.'

The piano-man ground his teeth and muttered a very rude thing. Then he struggled to his feet and, taking again the weight of his burden on his broad back, sought to continue his lumbering way down the Street of the Four Winds. But Jean-Baptiste held the instrument back by one of its wooden legs and informed the straining, perspiring fellow that he, Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde, had had a bellyful of the discourtesy and vulgarity that seemed to spew from the mouth of every Parisian, and he demanded an immediate and thorough apology.

'Apology is it? Apology!' the man panted as he staggered under the shifting weight. 'You just wait until I set this thing down, and I'll show you what kind of apology—'

But Jean-Baptiste angrily tugged the piano leg this way and that, causing the fellow to stumble about so ungracefully that he released a string of strangled curses followed by a sincere promise to do great and imaginative damage to his antagonist, directly he was able to get out from under this goddamned piano and deal with the cheeky son of a bitch!

Despairing of receiving the apology he required, Jean-Baptiste braced his back against the wall of the building, set both his feet against the piano, and thrust out with all his strength.

Righteously indignant though he was, our young Basque could not help admiring the way his adversary managed to keep his balance for the first dozen or so strides. Indeed, had the street been evenly paved, or had it been less muddy, it is conceivable that the fellow might have stumbled on until both man and piano exited the city through the Porte de St. Cloud, but alas, this epic voyage, blending as it would the skills of Terpsichore with those of Atlas, was not to be. Slipping on a leaf of rotting garbage, then tripping over a projecting step, the fellow careened from one side of the narrow street to the other, each collision producing a dissonant twang from the instrument and a profane cry from the man. A frightened cat darted out from a narrow alley, entangled itself in his feet and, with a last desperate bellow, he sprawled flat; and he might have

been crushed, had not the conventional legs of the instrument supported its weight above him. For several seconds he lay unmoving on the slimy cobbles beneath the freshly scarred piano, and Jean-Baptiste began to fear that the rogue might have received more punishment than his incivility had merited. But when he arrived at the fallen man, he found him drumming his fingers upon the ground, with his eyes closed tight in an effort to contain the Vesuvius of his fury.

Quietly, but with impressive sincerity, he muttered, 'I am going to punish that crazy bastard. I am going to take him by the scruff of his neck and—'

'Allow me to help you to your feet,' Jean-Baptiste said. 'You're getting filthy.'

'No! Don't touch me!' Slowly and stiffly, the musician rose from the cobbles and scowled down at our Basque.

Jesus-Mary-and-Joseph, the man was a giant! Even his thick chestnut-coloured beard seemed muscular.

Jean-Baptiste, whose eyes were level with the musician's collarbone, swallowed before saying in as calm a voice as possible, 'I assume you require satisfaction?'

'You assume…what?' The colossus' voice was a rich basso that rumbled up from a barrel chest.

Dreading more than anything that his voice might crack at this inopportune moment and give a false impression of fear, the Basque cleared his throat and continued, 'If I were not pressed for time just now, I would give you immediate satisfaction. But I live somewhere near here…I believe…and I shall return to this very spot at five o'clock this afternoon, at which time I shall be pleased to meet you and your seconds.'

The giant stared at his tormentor in silence, an ominous calm in his brown eyes. He drew a long sigh, then he spoke in his deep voice, 'I take it from our sing-song speech that you are from the south?'

Instantly Jean-Baptiste bristled and he drew himself up to his full height to say with brittle dignity, 'I have the honour to be Basque, sir, if that is any of your business.'

The musician lifted his eyes to the gods of the rooftops that preside over the Street of the Four Winds and said, 'I should have known! A Southerner!'

Jean-Baptiste's eyes narrowed as he pronounced evenly. 'May I take it that you will be here at five o'clock?'

'Oh, never fear, my little meridional. I shall be here,' the giant assured his antagonist.

'Good,' Jean-Baptiste said, bowing curtly. 'And now, if you would be so kind as to direct me to the Hôtel Grasse, I would—'

'What?' the other cried. 'Please don't tell me this annoying little flea is staying at the Hôtel Grasse!' he begged the Gods of the Rooftops. 'Why me? Why is it always me? What have I done to offend you?'

'I asked you, sir,' Jean-Baptiste repeated, his voice crisp with formality, 'the location of the Hôtel Grasse.'

'You must forgive me for not understanding at first, little person. But you see, I'm used to hearing "Grasse" pronounced with only one syllable.'

'I warn you, sir, that any further insolent reference to the musical speech of my homeland will require me to— Ah! Here it is!' Jean-Baptiste's eyes had just struck the hand-painted sign on the facade of the building before which they were standing: Hôtel Grasse. 'I shall not require your assistance after all…you great oaf!' And with this, he turned on his heel and entered the establishment he had been seeking for the past half hour.

The giant musician was left staring after him. He shook his head sorrowfully and lifted large melancholy eyes to the Gods of the Rooftops. 'Now look what you've done! I shall be obliged fight this insane Basque. It goes without saying that I shall destroy him. Then I'll undoubtedly go to prison. Perhaps even the guillotine! Why me, I ask you?'

The tutelary deities not deigning to respond to this most ancient of human questions, the musician sighed deeply and set to investigating the rent in his best—indeed, only—pair of trousers. His eyes grew large with self-pity as he examined the skinned knee beneath a triangular tear. Then he struck several tentative chords on his piano and was relieved to discover that it had acquired no new dissonances beyond those he had trained himself to play around. Knowing that the theft of so disreputable-looking and bulky an instrument was unlikely, even in that impoverished neighbourhood, he betook himself to the local estaminet, Au Coq Adroit, to console himself with a little glass. If the Gods had any sense of fair-play (though there was scant evidence of that!) perhaps this Basque madman would have disappeared into the churning throngs of Paris by the time he returned to carry his poor battered piano up to the his third-storey room in the Hôtel Grasse.

* * * * *

The entrance of this Hôtel Grasse spoke admonitory volumes to an observer skilled at deciphering cryptographs of odour, decay, poverty, and abuse. A long history of neglect and scrimp-penny meanness was recorded on walls encrusted with scabby coats of paint, each layer darker, to cover the dirt: first yellow, then green, yet later brown, all revealed by scrapes of various depths made by generations of artists lightheartedly struggling their modest furnishings up the narrow staircase with buoyant confidence, or glumly dragging them down in acceptance of a final disappointment. There was one modest consolation: no artist ever left the Hôtel Grasse because poverty forced him to seek less elegant accommodations. Beneath the Grasse, there were only the gutters, the arches of the bridges, or…yet more dreaded…a return to one's provincial home. But not all the hieroglyphs of scar and gouge had been caused

by lodgers moving in or out. Over the years, many had sought to prolong their descent into misery (always hoping to give Fate more time to recognize their excellence) by selling off their meagre belongings bit by bit to second-hand dealers. Also, it was the custom of the artists who were the hotel's principal patrons to eke out the thin-gruel-and-stale-bread days towards the end of their remittance quarters by pawning, first their extra clothes (extra, that is, to what they were wearing), then their tables and chairs, then their beds, and finally—but only as a last desperate recourse—the instruments of their art: their canvases, their pianos, their sculpting tools. Writers were understood to be at a notable disadvantage in this economy of poverty, having nothing worth pawning, unsold manuscripts being good only for lighting fires and, inasmuch as they could afford no wood, good for nothing at all.

The hall was redolent of poverty: mildew, unwashed garments, decades of steaming cabbage and turnips, all soaked into the walls together with a dank chill that spoke of small fires infrequently lit. But our young Basque did not decipher these visual and olfactory symbols on the Rosetta stone of misery, in part because he was not yet a true Parisian, but also because his attention was distracted by a band of colour a mere three centimetres wide that fascinated him more than did all the square meters of scabrous paint on the walls. This intriguing colour was one he could have reproduced on his pallet by blending into a base of white a dab of ochre, a touch of vermilion, and a hint of yellow. In was, in short, flesh-tone. What made him stare in fascination was not so much the colour itself, but its location: above the rolled–down black stocking of a young woman who had hitched up her skirts to protect them from the filthy stairs she was assailing with a wet rag. In all his nineteen years, Jean-Baptiste had never seen flesh above the knee of an adult woman, and it must be confessed that his riveted attention was not wholly professional in character, nor was it totally unmixed with a certain vague but delicious tingle of naughtiness.

'Strumpet! Whore! Showing yourself in this sluttish way!'

This shout in Jean-Baptiste's ear startled him out of his pleasantly iniquitous absorption, and he spun around to discover a sere little man standing in an open doorway, his bald pate covered by a greasy skull cap, his face stretched into a grimace of rage. As the young woman adjusted her skirts, blushing with embarrassment upon noticing he Jean-Baptiste for the first time, the old man bared his teeth and fixed the young artist with narrowed eyes. 'Be off! Have you nothing to do but to sneak in off the street to ogle this young creature? Is your mind nothing but a seething stew of sin and lust? Be off, I say! Or I'll have the bailiff on you!'

'Sir, I assure you that— '

'Assure me, do you? Assure me? Hah! I know your sort of assurances! It's her you'd like to assure, isn't it?' He said the word with a snarl that gave it every kind of unpleasant context. Then he thrust his face, bloated and purple with fury, into Jean-Baptiste's. 'Well, my young bantam cock, let me tell you

that she needs none of your assurance. She has all the assurance any woman could want! Better and more frequent assurances than any baby-faced pretty-boy could provide!'

As the young artist stood, flabbergasted by this onslaught, the old man turned his vitriol upon the woman. 'And as for you! Harlot! Bitch! Showing your ass right and left! Get inside! I'll attend to you later! I'll give you something you won't soon forget! And it won't be assurances either!'

The young woman scampered past the old man into the apartment, narrowly dodging the arthritic kick with which he sought to speed her on her way.

'What?' he cried, turning again to Jean-Baptiste and spraying him with spittle in his rage. 'Still here? Still sniffing about like a dog at the kitchen door? Salivating for a scrap from my marriage feast? Is that it?'

'Sir, you mistake my intentions. I was merely— '

'So now it's intentions, is it? First assurances, and now intentions! I know what intentions you have! I'll thank you to keep your intentions buttoned up in your pantaloons!' And with this he sought to deliver a kick aimed so as to damage the fountain of those intentions, but Jean-Baptiste dodged aside and the force of the kick stretched the brittle cord of the old man's groin painfully, causing him to clutch at it and cry out. 'Help! I am being assaulted! Help! You'll regret this, you young cockerel! I am a sergeant in the Garde Nationale! We know how to deal with the likes of you! Help! Help!'

Fearful lest some passer-by hear the old fool's cries, Jean-Baptiste grasped the little man by the lapels of his greasy dressing gown and tugged him up, holding him high against the wall so that only the toes of his carpet–slippers touched the floor. Sputtering with impotent fury, the old fellow twisted and struggled, his efforts causing his skullcap to slide down over his eyes. 'Help! Assassin! Someone help me, for the love of God!' But no one responded to his strangled cries, and in time he gave over his resistance and seemed content to hang against the wall, glaring at his opponent with glittering little black eyes. But when Jean-Baptiste tentatively relaxed his grip, he was rewarded by having his shins kicked and his cheek grazed by fingernails. An additional two minutes of the wall cure sufficed to extinguish the gentleman's rage, and he dangled there in limp docility, his face bloated and red, his toes no longer in contact with the floor.

'Now, sir,' Jean-Baptiste panted, 'if you are prepared to listen, I shall explain my presence in this madhouse. I am your new lodger. My first quarter's rent was sent a month ago by my former teacher, M. Hector Hastoy. As to your daughter, I assure you that I have not yet had the pleasure of her—'

'What?' squeaked the old man, his windpipe constricted by his collar. 'Not yet had the pleasure of her!'

' —I have not yet had the pleasure of her acquaintance,' Jean-Baptiste pursued doggedly, 'and I further assure you that nothing has passed between

us.'

'Between you!'

'Now if you will direct me to the owner of this establishment, I shall let you down. But if you persist in your insane behaviour, I am perfectly prepared to damage the M. Grasse's wall by banging it with your head. Is that clear?'

The sudden change in the old man's countenance and attitude quite baffled our Basque. The rheumy eyes, so recently narrowed in hate, widened to extravagant innocence; the thin mouth, so recently twisted in rage, stretched into a smile that revealed long yellow teeth. 'But, my dear fellow, I am M. Grasse,' he said in the sweetest purr imaginable.

'You?'

'At your service, young master. It was to me that your M. Hastoy forwarded fifty francs for your first month's rent.'

'Ah-ha! You have tripped yourself up with your lies, old man. It was not fifty francs I gave M. Hastoy. It was sixty-five!'

'Ah, as to that, my dear young friend—would you mind terribly lowering me to the floor? I am growing numb. My throat..my underarms..my crotch… Ah, that's better! Whew! I assure you that I received only fifty francs. No doubt your former teacher retained the rest as his fee for finding you excellent quarters in this evil city, where so many landlords are thieves and villains.'

'I refuse to believe that M. Hastoy would take money from me in that way!'

M. Grasse turned up his palms and touched his ears with his shoulders in the most total shrug imaginable. 'We must all live, my young hero. A franc here, a sou there..it all adds up. Business is bus — '

'We can discuss this another time, sir. I am in a great hurry. My first class begins in a few minutes. But I cannot go in these clothes. They would be considered too fine and elegant for a serious student. Worse yet, they might elicit the envy of my fellow students.'

'You really think so?' M. Grasse asked, eyeing the old-fashioned moss green pantaloons and the plum-coloured frock coat with ludicrously long tails.

'Would you direct me to the trunk that was shipped on before me?'

M. Grasse's mouth became perfectly round and his eyes opened wide above it: an O-umlaut of surprise. 'Your trunk, sir?'

'Oh, no! Don't say it!' Jean-Baptiste was dismayed. Half his money had evaporated on the trip up to Paris; his baggage had vanished; his magnificent new painting case had been stolen; and now the trunk containing his clothing and books had gone astray!

'Have no fear, young master,' M. Grasse coo'd soothingly. 'No doubt your trunk will arrive in its own time.'

'If it doesn't, I am lost! But I suppose there's nothing I can do about that now. I shall have to appear at my first lesson over-dressed. I only hope my

fellow students won't think me vain. Now, if you would be so good as to direct me to the Garnier Academy?'

The smarmy landlord gave directions and assured the young man that he would keep a sharp eye out for his trunk. 'Of course,' he added with a moist smile, 'When it arrives, I shall have to have a little something to give the carter.'

'What? But delivery was included in the cost of shipment!'

'Ah, my young friend, you have much to learn about this evil, greedy city. I must take you under my wing, lest you be bilked and cheated at every turn. Delivery is included in the cost of shipment, to be sure. But there is delivery, and there is…' He indicated the deep scrapes and gouges along the walls. '…delivery. If your precious pos sessions are to reach your room undamaged by rough handling, it will be necessary to slip the carter a little something.'

'This Paris is a gouffre de millions! Money seems to melt away!'

The old man sighed and rolled his head with an expression of deepest regret. 'Isn't that the truth?'

'Well, if there's nothing for it… How large a bribe must I offer to prevent the swindling carter from destroying my trunk?'

M. Grasse was plunged into a torment of uncertainty. To cite too high a figure might frighten his prey away; to say too little would be to waste an opportunity for profit. And wanton waste is, after all, a sin. He cleared his throat and suggested tentatively, 'Ah… One franc?'

'One franc, eh?'

Not having triggered the cry of outraged disbelief he had anticipated, M. Grasse hastily amended, '…Or two, perhaps?'

'Two francs!?'

'…But not a c entime more!' the landlord added quickly. 'No, no, we must not offer the greedy carter a centime more than two francs! I won't hear of it! Oh, he'll demand more! But I shall protect your in terests! After all, you are my guest. Oh, that rascal of a carter will fume and rage and threaten, but I shall face him down. "Not one more sou, you rogue!" I'll say. "Two francs. Take it or leave it!" No, no, my dear young man, I will not allow you to offer more than two francs.' He held out his bony hand for the coins.

Reluctantly, Jean-Baptiste drew the two francs from his rapidly diminishing hoard and placed them in M. Grasse's palm, which shut upon them with a castanet snap. 'You'll be pleased to know that your room is what in my profession is described as 'partially furnished', containing as it does a commodious bookcase for which you will no doubt find a thousand uses. So if you would care to inspect your accommodations, young master…?'

'I haven't the time. I must rush to the academy. But I'll ret urn as soon as possible. Please accept my apologies for any misunderstanding concerning your daughter.'

'My wife,' the landlord corrected in a dry tone.

'What? Oh, very well, express my apologies to your wife, too.'

'The young woman is my wife!'

'Really?'

'Is that so hard to believe?'

'Not at all! No, no, no. Naturally, I imagined… But it's of no importance. Well, I must be off!' He rushed out and, after barking his shins on the piano abandoned at the doorway and roundly cursing the chestnut-bearded oaf of a clumsy giant of a fool for leaving it there, he dashed off in the direction M. Grasse had indicated.

The wizened landlord peered after him, eyes narrowed. In a sing-song imitation of the Basque accent, he snarled, 'Naturally, I imagined she was your daughter.' Imagined, did he? Naturally, was it? Well, I can guess the sort of thing he imagines! Unnatural activities! Complicated and bizarre postures! Argh! The fellow's mind is a veritable sewer of lust! But I am more than a match for this hayseed with his handsome face and curly hair! I've got my talons into him now! Wants his trunk, does he? Well, he'll have to pay for it, and pay through the nose! That'll pay him back for his lustful imaginings! In His wisdom, The good Lord, created silly geese for the plucking, and far be it from me to fly in the face of His eternal design by leaving this provincial gander unplucked!'

Chapter Two
A Gutter Snipe

Monsieur Grasse's view of himself as a clever old Parisian hawk preparing to feast on goose à la Provençale suggests a useful avian metaphor for the inhabitants of that Paris in which our young Basque now found himself. We have witnessed his encounter with a brace of those proud, preening popinjays of High Fashion who drive their glistening tilburys along the avenues, reins dangling loosely from well-groomed hands, lazy-lidded eyes sliding over the polloi with unutterable contempt. The fathers of these wastrels are the flint-eyed eagles of Commerce who prey on the toil and ingenuity of others, ripping Profit from the body of Labour and carrying the still-dripping morsels back to their luxurious aeries to plop them into the upturned, gaping maws of their squawking young. Living in symbiotic association with these predators of Enterprise are the rapacious vultures of the Law who descend in fluttering flocks to batten on the orts of success and the spoils of disaster alike. Both eagle and vulture excite their flaccid flesh with the poules of Paris—flighty, fluffy young women from the under classes who exchange the warmth of their thighs for snug nests and gaudy plumage—in perference to their own comfortable plump-breasted bourgeoise hens who spend their days cooing over their broods and waddling about on daily rounds of visits, pecking at bits of gossip and clucking in righteous disapproval. Then there is the Academy, blinking owls of sage appearance, but dazed by the bright light of any new artistic dawn. And the raucous magpies of the stock market; and the kept canaries in ornate cages who sing upon command but never fly free; and the peacocks of the royal court strutting and displaying, so over–bred that they must be fed by others; and the albatrosses of the ancien régime hanging around the neck of Progress; and the buzzards of journalism picking at the carcass of yesterday's scandals. But of all this swarming flock, the quintessentially Parisian species is the snipe, the gutter-snipe, that sassy, irreverent child-of-the-streets; quick of hand, slick of wit, foul of mouth; thief, clown, mimic, irritant; but above all amused observer and relentless critic of the passing parade.

As chance would have it, one such urchin, known to god and Man only as 'the Snipe', had chosen the Street of the Four Winds as his feeding ground. This Snipe had many perches, but no nest. It slept in doorways and sheds, crevices and crannies, its choice depending on the weather, its mood, and the relative strength of locks and hasps. Shopkeepers of the district lived in dread of its adroit talons which could make an apple or a turnip disappear under their very eyes. Honest householders viewed it as a damaging example to their children, with its cocky swagger, its vulgar speech, and its total lack of humility in the presence of his betters. In fact, of all who lived in that impoverished

quartier, only the struggling young artists who had been attracted thither by cheap housing and romantic tradition treated the Snipe with fraternity, even affection, accepting him as both mascot and symbol. They delighted in his bravado and his scathing tongue, in his frank disrespect for authority in all its guises, and above all for the indomitable independence expressed in every feature of his delightfully ugly face, with its green wide-set eyes, its crooked gash of a grin extending from one protuberant ear to the other, its upturned bulb of a nose, and its thatch of mud-coloured hair that had never known the oppression of brush or comb.

How old was this gutter-snipe? Not even he could say, precisely. The death of his mother was beyond the reach of his memory; and the drunkard father who had carried him about the streets when he was a baby, clothed only in thin rags in the cruellest winter cold so that his shivering would wring pity from the hearts of the passers-by, had long ago been killed in a knife-fight in a nameless back alley. Let us give the Snipe…oh, say…thirteen years? When his elastic face was animated with joy or mischief, he seemed no more than seven or eight, but when his features were slack with despair or taut with hunger, he could have passed for an ancient dwarf. Yes, let's give him thirteen years—a fairly ripe age for these homeless children of the streets who seldom live to see twenty.

How did this bird of passage survive? What was its diet? In what plumage did it clothe itself? Well, with the Snipe everything was the best…or the worst. Because he sustained himself by theft, he sometimes dined on a rich pâté pinched from the counter of an elegant charcuterie across the river, but this delicacy would most likely be spread on a crust of stale bread he had found in a pile of garbage and brushed off, more or less carefully. At times, his pockets bulged with pomegranates; at other times, he munched a raw potato. He could remember once feasting on a whole roasted partridge liberated from a spit at a fair booth. He could also recall shivering in mid-winter in a lean-to behind a tannery where he discovered the gustatory potential of strips of raw leather, which he pronounced not at all that bad, especially when enhanced by the sauce of ravenous hunger. The Snipe's diet eschewed that mundane middle ground between banquet and garbage, between the exquisite and the execrable.

In speech, no less than in diet, the Snipe fluctuated between the gutter and the gods, sometimes expressing himself in his own splendidly profane argot, then instantly slipping into inflated turns of speech overheard from pompous actors taking a breath of air in theatre alleys, or from students gathered in wineshops to batter ideas with words. These orotund flights of language were imprinted whole and undigested on his mind with that facility of memory common to the illiterate.

It was the Snipe's boast that he was so clever a thief that he had never—not once!—been apprehended in the course of his unorthodox commercial ventures. Sadly, this central tenet of the lad's self-promulgated legend was not

true. Indeed, upon one occasion he had been obliged to hide himself in a disused warehouse for almost a week, slipping out only at night to scavenger what he could, because he had been pounded in the face by the fists of a shop-keeper and his wife for stealing a turnip, and he his pride would not allow him to show himself on the streets until the bruises and swelling had gone from his mouth and nose, for to do so would have been to admit that he had been caught. A reputation is a responsibility.

And his clothing? It was analogous to both his diet and his speech, a mixture of the splendid and the scrofulous. To scan his raiment from top to toe, we find his untameable mat of hair stuffed into a once-fine beaver hat that undergone the indignity of being run over by a brewery waggon, but which he wears cocked forward at a sassy angle. His coat had once been a swallow-tailed extravagance in emerald brocade, but its ex-owner would surely lament the raffish cachet lent to it by time, damage, and filth. Beneath this coat is the pride of the gamin's wardrobe, an embroidered waistcoat that shows traces of once having been scarlet and gold. True, its buttons have been snipped off and transferred to some newer garment, and they have been replaced by thongs of string; and true, it must have been made for a very short, very fat man, for at no point does it come into contact with Snipe's narrow chest; but so taken is the Snipe by this bit of elegance, that he often poses with his fist on his hip, the swallow-tailed coat swept back to reveal the glories of his embroidered waistcoat. As to his pantaloons… Alas, the accretions of mud that double the weight of their once-fine fabric contribute little to the over-all effect. In addition, they are far too big to stay up without being bunched about his slim hips by a piece of rope, a discomfort he avoids by pinning them directly to the inside of his waistcoat, and his body moves freely within their amplitude like the clapper in the great bell of Notre-Dame. The problem of their excessive length solved itself when his constant treading on the flopping cuffs finally wore them through. His boots are a testament to both his social adaptability and the catholicity of his taste, for one is a stout brogan of yellowish leather that would not have been out of place on the foot of a dock–worker, while the other is an evening pump of black calf of such fine quality that it would never have been discarded, had not its sole developed a disconcerting habit of flopping noisily from its torn stitching. The fact that both these shoes had been lasted for a left foot might have been a source of discomfort, were they not so voluminous as to give his feet perfect freedom within, although it was tiring to have to grip with his toes like a perching bird to avoid walking out of them.

The pride the Snipe takes in the elegance of his clothing might be regarded as crass materialism, were it not for his willingness to abandon any element of his sartorial melange when he happens across an abandoned (or poorly guarded) piece that captures his fancy. Because of this open–minded willingness to embrace new fashions, any description of Snipe's appearance must be understood to represent a frozen moment in a constant evolution.

But he was dressed exactly as we have limned him when he turned the corner into the Street of the Four Winds, his characteristic swagger somewhat inhibited by the leather case he lugged along, banging against his knee in rhythmic counterpoint to the flapping of his shoe sole. The currents of Fortune had not been running his way for the last few days, and his hunger had matured from a not unpleasant light-headedness to the acid gnawing of a stomach trying to digest itself. Nor did his enforced fast make it any easier to carry this heavy case he had found abandoned by some dunce on the other side of the river, near the Lafitte-Caillard coach depot. But he clung to his burden, in part because he could not bring himself to abandon booty rightfully his by the laws of salvage, and in part, because he hoped to exchange it for food.

In the meantime, perhaps he could stave off the worse pangs of hunger by doing some menial work for the fruit vendor on the corner. As he approached the stall, he promised himself not to offer the slightest insolence or provocation to the mistrustful grocer. No, he would be humble. He would cringe and fawn like a workman before his foreman, or a foreman before his master, or a master before his banker, or a banker before any nobleman. Sadly, his resolution to conceal his innate contempt for all tradesmen was immediately tested by the fat shopkeeper's glaring at him, arms spread to protect his bin of vegetables. 'Keep away, you thieving bastard!'

'But, Citizen Spinach, I come to offer the sweat of my brow in exchange for—'

'Get away from here, you pilfering little son of a bitch!' The grocer snatched up a stout stick and brandished it, while his wife lent a feminine touch to the conversation by adding, 'We've had you beaten up before, and we'll do it again, you thieving little turd!'

The Snipe's vow to hold his scathing tongue evaporated. He set his leather case aside and grinned at the grocer, every feature of his comically ugly face aglow with the joy of anticipated combat. 'You seem to be in bad humour today, Citizen Endive,' the gamin said in his ripest stage-door accent. 'May suggest something to improve your disposition? Why don't you select the largest of your cabbages then, holding it firmly in whichever hand you consider most adroit, cram it up your f*****g a**s!'

The grocer roared and lunged at the lad, who deftly avoided the stick as it moaned its promise of pain through the air. He slipped back into the street, where he kicked away the supporting leg of a bin, allowing a pyramid of carefully stacked apples to surrender themselves to the attractions of gravity and bounce merrily down the cobblestones.

'Oh, mercy me!' the Snipe cried, pressing his fingertips to his lips. 'Your fruit is escaping. Back, pippins! Back to your cage, I say!' He pretended to snap a whip over the fruit. 'Alas, it's no use. The tasty little rascals refuse to live under the roof of a greedy old sh*****d of a b*******st of an a*****e.'

As the grocer dashed about in frantic efforts to recapture his bruised apples, the Snipe snapped up two of the plumpest and, taking a great juicy bite out of one, committed the other to his deep pocket against future need. Then he took up the heavy leather case and strode saucily away from what he even he would have considered to be the excessively alliterative scene of a grunting grocer grovelling in the gutter, fumbling foolishly after fled fruit.

He was slap-clopping his way down the street, his thin body twisted to one side against the weight of the case, when he encountered one of that band of artists who were his only friends in the quartier.

'How goes it, Citizen Din?' he greeted.

'Oh, I've had bet ter days,' answered the giant musician in a tone drenched with Weltschmerz. 'Nothing's gone right for me today. My quarterly remittance finally arrived—late!—and when I went to redeem my piano from Father Jeremiah, I discovered that I owned more interest than I had estimated. Then as I was toting my piano home, an insane Basque knocked me down. Then he challenged me to a duel. And later, as I was grunting my instrument up to my room, old man Grasse snagged me on the stairs and demanded next quarter's rent in advance. There I stood, arguing with him, my back breaking under the weight of the piano. When my knees started to buckle, I had no choice but to dig into my pocket and give him the money that was supposed to see me through to the New Year. Then the old fool followed me into my room and stood there shouting and sputtering, accusing me of having unclean designs on his young wife. And when I escaped to the Caca d'Oie for a little glass of wine to cheer me up, old Père Caca reminded me that I hadn't yet paid last quarter's account, and he said I would receive no more credit until that was done. …Yes, I've had better days,' the musician repeated, the lower lids of his large brown eyes sagging with melancholy.

'I know how it is, Citizen Clamour,' the Snipe consoled philosophically. 'Sometimes the world is like unto a bottomless pit of rat s**t.'

'How true,' the musician agreed. Then he pointed to the leather case the gamin was tugging along at his hip. 'What do you have there?'

'An orphan I found deserted by the curb. I was obliged to snatch it up before some thief got his hooks on it, and now I'm going to see if Citizen Shekels will give it a good home.'

'I'm on my way back to Father Jeremiah's myself. I forgot to pick up my piano stool. ..It' s been that kind of day.' He automatically took up the burden of the leather case as easily as if it had been a scrap of paper as they walked down the street together, the one small and sinewy with a quick and jerky stride, the other huge and lumbering, his pace pachydermal.

The spring-bell above the pawn shop door tinkled as Auguste Queffelec, for such was the musician's thoroughly Breton name, ducked his head to pass under the lintel, followed by the grinning Snipe, who had just finished describing the Flight of the Apples from the Land of the Pyramids with

considerable elaboration.

'Ho-hey, Father Jeremiah!' Auguste boomed out. 'You have customers!'

'Coming,' a voice like parchment replied from the living quarters behind the shop.

'God, it's hot in here, Citizen Coins!' Snipe complained, opening his swallow-tailed coat and revealing his elegant waistcoat. 'You've put too many Christian babies into your stove back there.'

A thin, dry laugh came from the back room. 'I assure you that burn no more Christian babies than are absolutely necessary to keep my ancient bones warm. I shall be with you in a moment. Meanwhile, do try to restrain your impulse to steal and break things.'

The Snipe looked about disdainfully at the used and battered articles stacked on shelves or hanging from hooks in the ceiling. 'Everything in here is already broken,' he called back. 'And most of the things have been stolen at least once in their lives.' This was unjust, for Father Jeremiah differed from the generality of his trade in that he had absolute rules against accepting stolen goods. His shop had been the focus of the district's petty economics for three generations of struggling artists, the condition of its shelves serving as a calendar of the seasons and a barometer of their fortunes. As each quarter advanced, the shop slowly filled with pledged items, then it quickly emptied when the artists received their tri-monthly stipends. It is one of the great mysteries of life that, while each artist managed somehow to scrape by from quarter to quarter, this skill was never learned until the second quarter of his stay in Paris, his first quarter's money being bilked from him or squandered immediately upon his arrival. Thus, the economy of the artists was debt-based; they sustained themselves by pawning their possessions bit by bit, the last to go being the tools of their art. With the arrival of their quarterly remittances, they liberated their belongings and started the next three-month period in possession of their goods, but without any money. And the cycle of debt began again.

But alas, perpetual motion is only an alchemist's dream, for there is inevitable friction and loss within any closed system. Each quarter, Father Jeremiah extracted his little bit of profit, while time and use wore away some of the articles' value. Thus, when five or six years of unequal struggle against public indifference finally weakened the artist's grip on his dream, the last traces of his youthful aspirations were the battered articles which cluttered Father Jeremiah's shop, too disreputable to be sold to any but the lowest order of rag–pickers. ..Or, of course, to a confident new young artist setting up housekeeping in the Street of the Four Winds.

No one knew, or was curious to learn, the old Jew's real name. He and his shop were understood to have existed since the dawn of human existence. Indeed, it was generally believed that when the nomadic Franks first established themselves on the low, muddy river islands that the Romans would call Lutetia, they financed their stick-and-daub dwellings by pawning their primitive

belongings with Old Jeremiah, which name generations of artists had bestowed on the immortal pawnbroker because of the long accounts of woe and loss with which he countered their histrionic requests for better prices than the goods were worth. It was Jeremiah's misfortune to be the visible and available symbol of capitalist exploitation, so it was inevitable that his clients reacted with bitterness, often thinly camouflaged as humour, to the lush profits that street mythology insisted he made out of their misery. It was assumed, it goes without saying, that he cheated them, despite the fact that scrupulous comparison had taught the artists of the quartier that Father Jeremiah's terms were always more generous than those of the government-sponsored pawnshop, the Mont-de-Piété. The fact that no one had ever caught Old Jeremiah cheating did not lessen his reputation as a scoundrel, for prejudice is too hearty a vice to succumb to the feeble forces of experience and fact. The absence of evidence of his cheating was viewed as proof of his subtlety and deviousness. Oh, to be sure, there were rumours that Old Jeremiah occasionally helped a young writer to place a story with a journal, or wheedled a gallery owner into hanging a painting by one of the street's artists, but it was assumed that he did this only to help them earn the money they owed to him. And, yes, it was also true that when anyone died in debt to him, he sent a note of sympathy to the relatives or friends, together with the bill marked: Paid in Full. But this practice earned him little credit in the neighbourhood, serving, as it did, as further proof that he was so fabulously rich that he did not need the money, and therefore all the more vile a rogue for squeezing each last sou out of them.

'How may I serve you?' Old Jeremiah pushed through the dangling strings of beads that separated his back room from the shop. 'Ah, it is the giant who carries pianos about on his back, much as feebler men might carry melodies in their heads. Returned for his stool, no doubt. And I see he is accompanied by my young friend, Monsieur Snipe.'

'I have this leather case, Citizen Coins. It's been in my family for generations.'

'Has it indeed?' Jeremiah said, a non-committal smile spreading his lips while his eyes remained dull and distant, as though he were thinking of other, more important matters; as often he was, for the old money-lender could participate in the rote antiphonal chant of haggling while his mind caressed the poetry and the philosophical puzzles that occupied his higher thoughts.

'Yes,' the Snipe pursued. 'I hate parting with it, but I've had some difficulties with my investments. Everything I touch just turns to shit.'

'Indeed? That that must make your handshake a dreaded weapon.' Jeremiah peered over the counter and lightly scratched his thin beard with his thumbnail. 'Good leather. And surprisingly new. And newness, you will agree, is an uncommon quality in family heirlooms.'

The Snipe shrugged, thrust out his lower lip and spread his face in that most French of all gestures: one that cries out to the world: 'Nothing is my

fault!'

'Just what,' the old Jew asked in a tone implying only the vagues t interest, 'is in the case?'

'What's in the case?' the Snipe asked, wishing sincerely that he had thought to open it and look. 'You mean, what is inside the case? Or, to be more specific, what is in the interior portion of the case?'

'You do know, I assume'

'Know? Of course I know! It's been in the family for years! The case is filled with…things. Valuable things. In fact, my great -grandmother on her deathbed described them as, 'extremely valuable things'. Those were her very words. They were, as a matter of fact…' He cast his eyes down and drew a sharp, quivering breath. '…her last words.' He turned his face away to spare others the pain of witnessing his tears.

'Hm-m-m. Would you object to my taking a little look?'

While the pawnbroker unbuckled the case, Auguste Queffelec tugged open his shirt and mopped his broad chest with a rag he used as a handkerchief. 'God, it's hot in here!'

'My fragile health obliges me to keep it warm, young master,' Jeremiah said as he carefully opened the case. 'You might profitably view the temperature as a foretaste of hell designed to prepare you young artists for the punishment your sinful lives make inevitable. A spiritual service I offer absolutely free of—Ah-ha! The case contains artist's impedimenta: pigments, brushes, spirits, oil.' He peered over the case and down at the Snipe. 'It would appear that your great-grandmother was a painter.'

'Well…ah…she dabbled a bit, yes. So tell me, what will you give me for the case, contents and all? If I weren't temporarily short of money, I'd never consider letting it go for a mere five francs.'

The old Jew closed his eyes and shook his head slowly.

'Four francs then, you swindler!'

The pawnbroker examined his ceiling with philosophic absorption.

'All right, all right, three then! And that's my final price.'

The silence was heavy and eternal.

'…Two?' Spoken in the faint, interrogative tone of a diminished spirit.

Jeremiah settled his hooded eyes on Snipe's face with infinite calm. 'Not one franc, not one sou, not one liard. Look about you, young master. I possess painting cases of every size and condition. I need another one like a dead man needs cupping. Also, there is the possibility—just the possibility, mind you—that this case is stolen.'

'Stolen?!' Snipe's eyes grew round with offended disbelief. 'Are you accusing my great-grandmother of being a thief?'

'Certainly not, young master. Perhaps the honest lady did not know it was stolen when she purchased it for the noble purpose passing it down in your family as a priceless heirloom.'

The Snipe looked defeated and suddenly very old. 'Ah…you wouldn't be interested in buying an apple, would you?'

Old Jeremiah caught a shadow of desperation on the lad's usually insolent eyes. 'Ah well now, an apple's a totally different proposition. I could enjoy the fruit now and plant the seeds to make generations of flourishing apple trees. All in all, not a bad investment. For an apple, I'll give you two sous.'

'Done!'

They both knew that two sous would buy you four of the finest apples in the marketplace.

Auguste mopped his face with his cloth again. 'Now what about my stool?'

'Ah, yes. It's there in the corner, where it has enjoyed the warmth of my humble shop for nearly a month.'

Auguste settled his large melancholy eyes on the pawnbroker. 'And how much are you going to soak me for it?'

'I gave you ten sous for it. I shall return it to you for eleven. Does that seem fair?'

'It's a swindle,' the musician groaned, more out of commercial protocol than conviction, as he dug into his pocket and pulled out his few remaining coins. He had rescued his winter coat, his three-legged table, his chair, and his piano; he had paid in advance his next quarter's rent; he had settled his accounts at the horse meat shop, the wine shop, the greengrocer's and the bakery; and he had purchased a ream of scored paper for composition. And now he looked mournfully down into his palm at his remaining pittance. He briefly considered the possibility of composing while standing up, but his great height caused him to reject that option.

'Oh, very well,' he said with a sigh, 'I'll take the stool.' And he dropped two small coins into Old Jeremiah's hand.

'Say, Citizen Semiquaver, while you're in a buying mood, you wouldn't happen to be in the market for a painting case by any chance?' the Snipe asked. 'A brand new family heirloom! We're sacrificing it for two francs as a good-will gesture.'

For all that he posed the question in a cocky, off-hand way, Auguste could read a note of anxiety in the boy's voice, so he responded, 'As it happens, I've been looking for just such a painting case as a present for Alexandre. He lent me money twice last quarter, and you know how he is. Never accepts repayment.'

Old Jeremiah flicked a glance at the giant. But then, who was he to criticize someone for foolish profligacy? He who had just paid two sous for an unwanted apple?

The Snipe pocketed the two one-franc pieces and left the shop, whistling tunelessly through his front teeth, his loose sole flapping in counterpoint as he considered which of his ad hoc perches would have the honour of sheltering

him that night.

As Auguste Queffelec trudged back to the Hotel Grasse, piano stool in one hand and painting case in the other, he sighed at the realization that he had only six sous left to contribute toward that evening's Autumnfest of Saint Simplimus of Bohemia, his cenacle's traditional celebration of the arrival of quarterly remittances and the return of Wealth and Plenty.

Auguste stooped to pick up a trampled piece of printed paper fluttering in the gutter. He sighed once more at the familiar excesses of type as much as at the disregard for his concert.

Be Enlightened!! Be Amused!! Be Entertained!!

The Cenacle Of Saint Simplimus Of Bohemia
is honoured to offer!!

FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY!!

An Evening of Cultural, Artistic and Intellectual Nourishment
(Whistling, standing on tables, or shouting out lewd remarks will be Absolutely Forbidden!!)

Schedule of Tariffs

Comrades of the Cenacle of Saint Simplimus.....Free!!
Workers, Students, Ne'er-do-wells.....Free!!
Other residents of the Latin Quarter.....1 Franc
Lawyers, Priests, and Property Developers.....100 Francs
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(Members of the Royal Family, Government Ministers, Gardes Nationales, Art Critics, Immortals of the Academy ,and Lickspittal Slaves of the École des Beaux Arts will not be admitted at any price, their tearful supplications notwithstanding!!)

MUSIC! MUSIC! MUSIC! MUSIC! MUSIC!

For the first time in Public! The final portions of . . . . .

SYMPHONY ON BLACK
by
Auguste Queffelec
eluded in which ordeal will be:
A Closing Mov nt, a Coda, a Reprise, a Finale, and a Postlude
(Encores à discrétion)

MIME! MIME! MIME! MIME! MIME!

That Perfect and Peerless Poet
Julien Toussaint
will offer his widely-acclaimed mime:
"Man Preparing To Write a Short Poem"

M. Toussaint will be ably Assisted, Accompanied and Abetted by:
That Perfect and Peerless Sculptor
Mlle. Josephine Jouvert
performing her famous companion mime piece:
"Woman Reluctantly Watching Man Prepare to Write a Short Poem"

THE FOLLOWING RULES OF CONDUCT WILL BE STRICTLY ENFORCED!
A. Humming in languages other than French is strictly forbidden!
B. Dancing in languages other than French is similarly discouraged!
C. (Rule 'C' is a secret)
D. Warning: Vulgar jokes may be copied down for future use!
E. Expressions of anti-government sentiments will be severely applauded.

REMEMBER THE GUILLOTINE!!! ...and what about the Serbian question?

Chapter Three
Temple of the Muses

The Academy Garnier occupied a building that had been elevated, albeit with minimal capital outlay, from its former status as a tannery to its current dignity as a temple of the Muses and a nursery for precious young talents. A dirty, impoverished light penetrated the dust-laden air through three soot-encrusted windows that had been let into the north side of the edifice. In summer, the students stripped to shirtsleeves, stains of perspiration darkening their backs and underarms as they toiled away in air that was heavy with the slippery smell of oil and the jagged smell of turpentine. In winter, a single cast iron stove near the models' platform glowed red and snorted dangerously in its unavailing efforts to temper the drafty cavern, while the young artists, seeking mutual body heat to keep their fingers flexible, clustered their easels together, jostling elbows, or treading on one another's toes when they stepped back to survey their work. Only during six weeks in spring and two months in fall were climatic conditions within the academy favourable to the flourishing of human life (to say nothing of the flourishing of talent), as on this September day when the chamber was crowded with students: noisy, expectant, tense, irritable and jealous of the placement of their easels in strict order of precedence, senior students closest to the posing platform, younger aspirants further back. But today there was no model. Each student's easel held his best canvass of the past six months, at which he would pretend to be working when Maître Hyacinthe Garnier made his rounds, suggesting little corrections here, little improvements there. Those students who had been around long enough to 'know the ropes' intentionally created minor errors of blending or perspective, knowing what pleasure the Maître took in demonstrating to the appropriately awed student how improvement could be effected with only a flick or two of the master's experienced brush, simple corrections that would induce the student to shake his head, smile slackly, and puff out a little breath of air: a catalogue of gestures meant to communicate, not only the student's boundless admiration, but his doubt that he, himself, would ever achieve such skill, insight and talent. To avoid being considered a sycophant by his fellows, the student would usually follow this mime of worshipful awe by the sign of the cuckold behind the Maître's head when he had turned to the next easel.

They engaged in this humiliating pantomime of respect for a man whose gifts they privately ridiculed because they knew that the first step on the long, steep, slippery path to success was the garnering of medals and certificates of merit at competitions which they could enter only with the blessing of the Maître. Opportunities to attract his attention were far from frequent, as Hyacinthe Garnier's well-developed sense of profit prompted him to fill his

academy with as many paying students as the space could hold, while his admirable husbandry of his time reduced his visits to no more than one each month.

Lest Maître Garnier be accused of but minimal devotion to the noble calling of mentor, it must be said in his defense that he was no more lax in his duties than were other members of the Academy who lent their names to those private academies to which they gave little else. If anyone had had the effrontery to point out the self-serving nature of this inbred system, Maître Garnier could have countered by demonstrating that French art had flourished under it, producing in the last decade alone names that would echo forever down the halls of Fame: such eternal masters as Brisset, Bennoury, Lenepreu, and—dare he abjure false modesty and say it himself?—Garnier.

So far as the mundane business of day-to-day teaching went, he employed several ex-students who were well versed in the strict formulae, themes and techniques that both defined and restricted academic art. It was Maître Garnier's view that the inspiration generated by his monthly rounds of the easels was a contribution upon which no value could be placed. (Most of the students saw it this way too, though they phrased it a bit differently.) To be fair, one must admit that the professor's free time was rare and therefore valuable, for he accepted the arduous burden of keeping his school in the public eye by attending endless rounds of dinners and gatherings of art enthusiasts. Far from leaving him time to squander in contact with his pupils, these social duties would have denied him time to accomplish his own profitable commissions, were it not for the half dozen apprentices he allowed to perform such rote tasks as design, composition, background, and detail.

Each of the aspiring artists who crowded into the Garnier Academy that autumn afternoon—setting up their canvasses, exchanging salacious stories, pretending to work, playing pranks upon their more serious-minded fellows, laughing, bragging…but each worrying secretly about his future —each of them had already accomplished the first important step on the path to success: he had been accepted into a school with a 'name'. A few of them would be selected to compete under the academy's ægis for medals and awards. Most of those fortunate enough to win one or two such prizes would withdraw from the æsthetic battlefield and retire to their home provinces where they would execute flattering portraits of successful merchants, produce sentimental images of anguished, damp-eyed martyrs for the local church, or they would blemish the walls of municipal buildings with teeming canvasses depicting obscure historical incidents of purely local significance. It would be said in their provincial society that they had won all sorts of honours in Paris ('had swept the city before them' was the phrase most often employed) but had declined the enticements of that soul-less fleshpot in favour of the wholesome qualities of their native city and its sturdy, reliable inhabitants. In later life, they might allow themselves the occasional sigh or fleeting, grey smile of regret over the

glories they had forsaken, but they would find solace in comfortable marriages, in assured social positions, and in the numbing narcosis of distinction among mediocrities.

For those few who were brave enough, egotistic enough, or foolish enough to remain in Paris after winning the obligatory number of medals and awards, there was the long battle for recognition in which the principal weapons were family connections, favour curried from protectors within the court or government, and unceasing praise of the academic establishment. In time, if one developed an apologetic intelligence and a supple spine, if one abjured all artistic heterodoxy, if one attended and offered the right kind of suppers with the right kind of people, if one never allowed the bite of wit to blemish one's bland good humour, if one subscribed to the current clichés of creativity and criticism, and above all if one lived long enough for his fires of his genius to cool into chalky embers, one could look forward to becoming an Immortal of the Academy.

Once 'in', one's position was unassail able, for it was accepted practice within the artistic establishment to avoid hurtful competition and dangerous comparison by technique of each master carving out a specialty for himself and remaining strictly within it. Thus, Maître Untel was acknowledged to be unequalled at painting paunchy business men in the ennobling raiment of Roman senators, their brows bound with laurel wreaths to commemorate coups of fiscal duplicity; and Maître Lautre had no rival in rendering maidens poised on the cusp of puberty, their bland, chubby faces reflecting that mindless innocence that attracted matronly clients whose husbands appreciated the gossamer raiment that revealed here and there glimpses of nubile meat; and Maître Quisait did patriotic scenes of the well-scrubbed, shining-faced masses advancing in endless numbers to offer their lives to the glory of France, their eyes shining with gratitude for the opportunity; and our own Maître Garnier was famed for allegorical canvasses crowded with numbly smiling, well-nourished nudes of marshmallow flesh, their ample buttocks tinged at the crevices with a sugary pink for which his students had a name too vulgar to repeat.

For the very gifted—and the very lucky—there was a short-cut to fame and glory which, while it did not assure escape from the idioms and iterations of academic art, at least liberated the artist from demeaning years of lickspittle fawning on influential people.

One might win the great annual competition for the Prix de Rome.

None of the boisterous students crowding the Garnier Academy that September day dared to hope that he would be called upon to represent their school in the titanic clash of talents and support that was the Prix de Rome, for it was a foregone conclusion that this honour would fall to their withdrawn, rather cold, colleague, the one they called with a blend of sarcasm and envy 'The Genius'. This exceptionally talented young man had already swept up half a dozen of the most prestigious awards, and it was widely anticipated that he

would win the Prix de Rome, reflecting glory upon the Garnier Academy and upon the reputations of all who studied there.

As this 'Genius' is one of the little circle of struggling artists who share among them the onerous duties and slight glories associated with performing the hero's role in this book, it would be negligent not to introduce him. He is the young man standing in the place of preference closest to the posing platform. No, no…not the fellow demonstrating his original sense of humour by spitting sodden wads of chewed paper at the napes of unsuspecting necks. That is the massier, the senior student who is in charge of the others, a responsibility he discharges with much hectoring and swagger. After the 'Genius', this massier is considered the most likely to gain fame and riches, for he possesses adequate technical skill, fairly good family connections, driving ambition, and a blissful lack of that inspiration and originality that would threaten his acceptance into the establishment. No, The Genius (or, to reveal his name, Alexandre Montresault) is that intense young man working there, just beyond…Yes, that's the one. You've spotted him. The aristocratic -looking fellow with the translucent skin and the fine, prematurely thin hair that floats about his head like a mist; the one with the disturbing, smeared glow in his chocolate-brown eyes. The more discerning might recognize the misted embers in his eyes for, not the fires of inspiration, but the cold fever of drugs. For this gifted young man is a victim of absinthe, with which corrupting anodyne he poisons his mind in an effort to combat the bouts of black depression that plague his young life.

He works at his easel, so absorbed that he is not distracted by the chaos and skylarking those around him, indeed, so withdrawn and intense that he fails to notice the clattering, headlong stumble into the studio of an out-of-breath young provincial dressed in outlandishly out-of-fashion clothes. The sudden appearance of this spectre from the sartorial past caused all chatter and antics to cease in mid-flight and a wave of stunned silence to pass over the chamber.

'What have the Gods beshat upon us?' wondered one student in a voice hushed with awe.

'Regard the antique plum-coloured frock coat!' said another with mock awe. 'Piss-in-my-paint-pot if it's not the spirit of a long-dead student come back to haunt the place!'

'Look at the neckcloth wrapped up to the ears! Surely this is the atavar of all things outmoded and rural!'

'Yea, 'Tis the primordial hick! The seed of all hayseeds!'

'Ah, but look at that curly cascade of ebony hair! It's beautiful! That perfect complexion! Those almond eyes! That ivory brow!'

'Oh, God, please let it be a model! Please grant that it's come to pose for us—and for free. I ask it in the name of He who is all good and deserving of all our love.'

'What a saving of money! We would have one model for both Apollo and

Aphrodite!'

'But hold, fellows! See how it scowls at us and glares! See how its eyes flash in anger! Dost think 'tis outraged? O, friends, I quake lest it do us dire hurt!'

'Hark, it draweth breath!'

' Hush, it speaketh!'

The new arrival struggled to contain his anger as he announced with all the dignity he could muster, 'Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde.'

'Huzzah!'

'Bravo!'

'Well said!'

'Ô, speak again, fair Caraca…Curucu…Cocoro…'

'Cock-a-doodle-doo!'

Only by dint of epic self-control did Jean-Baptiste resist his impulse to challenge his tormentors to duels, each of which he would gladly have spaced only ten minutes apart. He clenched his jaw and drew a deep breath before speaking. 'I believe Maître Garnier is expecting me. I was recommended to him by my drawing master, M. Hastoy.' And when they did not seem to be awed by this famous name, he repeated, 'M. Hector Hastoy? …Of Bayonne?'

Winking to his neighbours and donning his most serious face, the massier pushed through the circle of students, bowed to Jean-Baptiste much too deeply, and said, 'Please forgive these rascals, sir. They didn't know they were in the presence of Jean-Baptiste Carabaradara, student of that world–famous drawing master…what was his name again?'

'M. Hastoy,' Jean-Baptiste said stiffly.

'Of course! M. Hastoy, world-famous drawing master from from…what was that city again?'

'Bayonne!'

'Just so! Bayonne! Capital and cultural centre of…just where is Bayonne?'

'Sir, if you are attempting to— '

'No doubt Maître Garnier is apprehensive about meeting you, lest he prove unworthy to guide so gifted a pupil. But look here, Coroborodoro— '

'Cariquiriborde!'

'Have it your own way. But look here; you mustn't be be too hard on my comrades. They mistook you for some rural boob recently arrived atop a cheap diligence from the murkiest depths of the provinces. I, by the way, am the massier of this humble academy.'

Jean-Baptiste made a curt, minimal bow.

'My responsibilities include assigning the positions of the easels, nearest to the models for the old hands, farther away for the second-year students, and for the likes of you…? Oh, somewhere out in the corridor, probably. You

won't be able to actually see the models, but we shall attempt to describe them to you as fully as possible.'

'My dear sir— '

'I am called the massier because I manage the masse, id est, the common pool of money to which everyone contributes for hiring models and buying softsoap, oil, pigments, rags, etc. Further, I handle the common funds for our mid-day bread and wine. Taken all in all, the massier occupies the very opposite end of the social hierarchy from the rapin, which lowly, insignificant and universally despised role you, M. Cariquiriborde, have the misfortune to assume from this moment forth.'

Jean-Baptiste regarded the massier with frank mistrust. 'And just what is a rapin?'

'Almost nothing, my good fellow, almost nothing.'

'I must insist that you refrain from calling me your good fellow, my good fellow.'

'Don't play the haughty Basque with me! Ah, you wonder how I know what part of France beshat you upon the world of art? Well, it's no great feat to recognize the southwesterner his sounded 'e's' and the bowstring twang of his nasals. However, as balm for your wounded pride I will explain that every school in Paris has its rapin, who is always the newest student. It's tradition.'

'Hm-m. And what are a rapin's duties and privileges?'

'The privileges are easy to enumerate. None! The duties are considerably more extensive. You will be required to arrive early in winter to light the fires, and even earlier in summer to open the windows; you will clean and sweep after every class; you will wash out everyone's brushes; you will run errands, you will keep the water jugs full, you will grind our colours, you will— '

'But when do I do my work?' Jean-Baptiste wanted to know.

'There'll be little time to squander on such egotistic matters,' the massier assured him, 'until the arrival of the next newcomer, who will automatically become the class's rapin, while you will rise to become one of us. ...The least of us, to be sure.'

The Basque looked from face to face of the ring of students crowding around him, and in every eye he saw the twinkle of mirth. 'I...see,' he said evenly.

'Now,' continued the massier, 'let us attend to financial affairs. First, there is the matter of the masse, your contribution to the general fund.'

'And how much will that be?'

'Oh, the usual,' the massier said offhandedly. 'Twenty-five francs per month.'

Alexandre Montresault, who had continued working at his canvass, lifted his eyebrows at the mention of twenty-five francs. But then he shrugged and returned to his painting. This was, after all, none of his business.

'Twenty-five francs?' Jean-Baptiste repeated, his thin tone revealing the

gaping hole this would rip through his meagre resources.

'Per month.'

'Per month?'

'And in advance.' The massier held out his hand. The students exchanged nudges, wondering if this rural boob would fall for it.

With as much aplomb as he could muster, Jean-Baptiste drew a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his waistcoat and unfolded it to reveal the seven gold louis that were all that remained of his wealth. When the students pressed around and stood on tiptoes to see his fortune, he had an impulse to turn his back, but he considered this to be beneath his dignity as a man of the world.

'Look,' the self-appointed academy clown cried. 'He conceals his money in a napkin!'

'Clever!' cried another. 'Surely baffle every pickpocket in Paris will weep with bafflement and frustration!'

'I'll wager he hides it in his boot when he's travelling!' added a third, sputtering with laughter at the rustic ploy.

'Certainly not!' Jean-Baptiste replied hotly, not only stung by their ridicule but astonished that they had divined his secret banking practices. He extracted one louis and carefully returned the handkerchief to his inner pocket. Then he took a five-franc piece from his watch pocket. 'There you are, sir,' he said, almost grandly.

'Just right,' the massier said, pocketing the coins. 'A twenty-baller and a five-baller. This fellow's a whiz at high finance. Now let us pass on to the bienvenue.'

'And what is that?' Jean-Baptiste's eyes narrowed with mistrust.

'That, my dear rapin, is just what it would seem to be, a small fee to assure your welcome amongst us. A little something so we can all drink your health and prosperity.'

'Precisely how little?'

The massier thrust out his lower lip and shrugged. 'Just the usual…twenty-five balls.'

'Another twenty-five francs?'

'But take heart, greenhorn. The bienvenue is paid only once, on the day of the newcomer's arrival.' And he held his hand out again.

'I…I'm afraid I don't have the correct change,' Jean-Baptiste admitted.

'He's afraid he doesn't have the correct change,' echoed one of the students from the back of the circle, imitating the Basque's singsong speech.

'Identify yourself, sir!' Jean-Baptiste cried out, his fierce eyes raking the faces of his taunters. 'I'll be delighted to improve your manners for you!'

But the only responses he got were concealed snickers, a muffled imitation of a cockcrow, and a repetition of his last sentence with an exaggeration of his southern accent.

'As you do not have the exact change,' the massier said, 'I am willing to

accept two louis. The extra fifteen francs I shall place against next month's masse. What could be fairer?'

Winks and nudges were exchanged as the students held their breaths to see if the newcomer was going to swallow this whole. In the expectant hush, a quiet voice said, 'It would be fairer to leave the poor fellow alone and let those of us who are working get on with it.'

Everyone turned towards The Genius, who had spoken without raising his eyes from his canvass.

'This is none of your affair, Montresault,' the massier said.

'Perhaps not,' Alexandre muttered distantly, unwilling to allow this nuisance to intersect his attention to his work. He stepped back from his easel and squinted, then he stepped forward to make a small correction.

'Sir,' said Jean-Baptiste, pushing through the students and approaching the slim, pale artist, 'allow me to introduce myself. I am Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde.' He bowed stiffly.

'So I heard,' Alexandre muttered, his attention still unbroken. 'Would you mind stepping back. You are standing in my light.'

'In your…? Oh, sorry! Sir, you seem to be a fair-minded gentleman.'

'Do I?'

'Allow me to explain my position. I— '

'Your position is that of a man who is still blocking my light.'

'Sorry again. You see, sir, I am willing to perform such tasks and pay such fees as are traditional, but I do not intend to be made the butt of ridicule, and I don't intend to be cheated.'

'Hm-m-m.' The Genius was only half-listening.

'I therefore ask you, as a fellow gentleman, to tell me if the menial duties described to me are indeed customary for a newcomer.'

Alexandre Montresault was carefully blending a shade on his palette, from which task he deflected only the minimal attention necessary to mutter, 'Such are indeed the juvenile customs of this place. This ass of a massier has been honest with you…to that extent, at least.'

'Who are you calling an ass?' the massier demanded, his chin thrust forward.

Alexandre looked up from his work for the first time and, dismissing the massier with a glance of weary disdain, said to Jean-Baptiste. 'Both the masse and the bienvenue are traditional and obligatory, but they are ten francs each, not twenty-five.'

There was a general groan among the students at this spoil-sport revelation.

'Thank you, sir,' Jean-Baptiste said, bowing curtly. Then he turned to the massier. 'You, sir, have twenty-five francs from me. The masse and the bienvenue total to twenty. Therefore, you owe me five francs. I'll have it now, if you please.' And he held out his hand.

'Oh, but I'm afraid I don't have the correct change,' the massier winked to his fellows.

'I see. Well, in that case, I must inform you that in the Pays Basque a broken nose is valued at five francs. I shall be delighted to break yours and call us even.'

'A tiger!' cried one of the students from the back. 'We have a Basque tiger amongst us!'

'A Fight! A Fight!' several voices egged on.

Standing almost chin to chin with Jean-Baptiste, for a long moment the massier seemed to evaluate his chances against this handsome southerner whose eyes rested on him with that blend of calm and amusement that characterizes the man who loves a scrap. The massier shrugged and sniffed. 'Christ-on-the-cross, hayseed, I had no intention of keeping your paltry five francs. Can't you take a joke? Here's your stupid ecu. Put it towards the purchase of some decent clothes.' And he tossed the five-franc piece to Jean-Baptiste.

'You don't like my clothes, sir?' Jean-Baptiste's tone suggested that he was far from done with this confrontation.

'On the contrary, I respect your garments as valuable antiques—reminders of how our ancestors protected themselves from the elements before the advent of tailoring.'

Jean-Baptiste's eyes narrowed. 'Perhaps, sir, you would care to— '

'The Ordeal!' cried out one of the young students.

'Yes! Yes! The Ordeal!'

The massier's eyes shone with vindictive delight at this opportunity to punish his antagonist without personal risk. 'Ah, yes! The Ordeal. What with this fellow's coin-pinching and bellicose gasconade, I almost forgot the Ordeal. And that wouldn't do at all! You see, my feisty Basque, it is traditional chez Garnier for each new rapin to face the dreaded Ordeal to prove his worthiness to breathe the same air as his superiors. If you don't believe me, you may ask your fellow-countryman yonder.' He flipped his hand towards The Genius, who had returned his attention to his canvass.

'My fellow-countryman?' Jean-Baptiste stepped again to Montresault's easel, this time careful to avoid blocking his light. 'Excuse me, sir, but this person tells me that we are fellow-countrymen. May I know your name?'

'Alexandre Montresault,' he muttered, his brush between his teeth as he worked up a mixture on his palette with his knife.

'Montresault? Montresault? But that's not a Basque name.'

'Quite so. I am Béarnais. But in their view, the south is the south. We're all the same to them. Now, be a good fellow and let me work.'

'..All the same ?' Jean-Baptiste glowered. 'All the same! A noble, trusting Basque and an infamous, back-stabbing Béarnais? All the same, sir?'

Alexandre sighed deeply and set his knife aside, realizing that he was unlikely to get anything done until this matter was settled. 'Spare me your

indignation. At home, the gulfs separating the Basque and Béarnais are recognized to be many and wide. Our two peoples detest and mistrust one another as only neighbours with nearly identical histories, customs and characteristics can. But while you and I are aware of vast historical, cultural, linguistic and religious differences between our two peoples, we cannot expect these to be appreciated by the Parisian, that most provincial of all beings for whom the known world ends at the city's fortifications. For those blinded by Parisian cultural myopia all southerners are equally southern, all foreigners are equally foreign, and such heathen races as the English and the Japanese are virtually indistinguishable, sharing as they do the overwhelming cultural blemish of being non-Parisian. This urban parochialism is one of the first things the newly-arrived rustic boobs affect so as avoid being thought of as rustic boobs. This explains the teasing of your fellow-students, not one of whom is a born Parisian. And now, if I have explained this matter to your satisfaction, perhaps you will find it in your heart to forgive me for not being Basque, and will cooperate with these over-grown children in getting the silly tradition of the Ordeal out of the way, and leave me to work in peace, for the love of God!'

'On with the Ordeal!' cried one of the students, as others pulled back easels to make a space around the model's platform.

'But be quick about it,' a voice warned. 'Don't forget that this is the day Old Garnier blesses us with his monthly visit!'

'Oh, to hell with the near-sighted old fart.'

This somewhat casual description of their distinguished Maître shocked Jean-Baptiste, but he no longer harboured any illusions about the probity and good manners of his fellow students, or indeed of Parisians in general. Prepared to shame these blasphemous fellows with an exhibition of Basque dignity under duress, he asked calmly, 'And of what does this ordeal of yours consist?'

'Oh, it's really quite mild,' the massier assured him. 'Nothing so strenuous and inventive as some of the other schools have for their rapins. Our Ordeal involves a short oration given while standing on the modeling platform. Ex temporare, of course.'

'Very well.'

'And…in the nude.'

'Nude?' Jean-Baptiste's dignity temporarily fled.

'As nude as you were the day your mother grunted you out,' the messier specified. 'No haggling now. Each one of us has gone through the Ordeal when he was a lowly rapin.'

Over the heads of the others, Jean-Baptiste caught Alexandre's attention and raised his brows to ask if this were indeed the tradition. Montresault closed his eyes and nodded wearily.

'Very well,' the Basque said, lifting his chin, 'nude it shall be.' With no further fuss he began to disrobe, folding each garment carefully and ignoring

the criticism each element of dress elicited. He regretted that the room was chilly, lest any shivering be misinterpreted as shame or, worse yet, fear. His uncle the Abbé had taught him that no man pure of spirit need feel shame, and it goes without saying that a Basque knows no fear. As nude as a man can be without bleeding, he mounted the platform and stood, shoulders square, his eyes nobly held on the middle distance. 'And the theme of my extemporaneous oration?' he asked, with almost no quaver at all in his voice.

'It comes in two parts. First, we require a brief description of the history, function and moral values of Art in all its forms and manifestations,' the massier said. 'Normally we ask that this be phrased succinctly in no more than a hundred syllables. But we shall relax that restriction in your case, as your southern chant would make that fewer than twenty words.'

Overlooking this barb, Jean-Baptiste cleared his throat. In fact, he had often thought about the noble purposes of art, and about his own place within that lofty vocation, so he was soon addressing them in his richest voice, reproducing the histrionic gestures he had admired in the travelling orators he had seen holding forth in public squares. His inspirational juices were just beginning to flow when cat calls and hoots began to fill the room.

'For the love of God, put a bung in it!'

'He's as sentimental as a drunken whore!'

'Jesus-on-the-rood, he knows less about art than a drawing master!'

'…Or a critic!'

'Enough! Enough! Move on to part two!'

'Yes! Part two!'

Jean-Baptiste concealed his injured pride and asked, 'And the subject of this second part?'

The massier was delighted to inform him. 'We shall require a frank, honest, and minutely detailed description of your first sexual experience.'

'My…what?'

'And no glossing over the juicier bits!' cried one voice.

'Begin with a description of the woman involved,' shouted another. 'And don't try to get away with exaggerations. We're all students of anatomy here.'

'But, really, gentlemen…'

'No, begin with the locale!' insisted a voice from the back. 'Build the story up bit by tantalizing bit. Give us first the setting. Was it in her bedroom? Perhaps within hearing of an aged father sleeping in the next room?'

'Was it in a haystack during harvest?'

'…Or maybe on the lid of a casket during a wake?' the academy clown asked.

'Come on! Let's have it!'

Everything in Jean-Baptiste's chivalrous nature and prudish upbringing protested against this thing he was being called upon to do. 'Really…as a man of honour…I can hardly be expected to — '

'Out with it! How did she react?'

'Did she whimper and beg for mercy?'

'..Did you?' the clown wanted to know.

The Basque raised his hand for silence. 'Very well, gentlemen. Since you insist, I shall describe my first..romantic contact with a woman.'

A hush descended over the room and all eyes glittered with anticipation and devilment. Jean-Baptiste drew a long breath, then fixed his gaze over the heads of his tormentors, his expression suggestive of three-colour prints of Christian martyrs.

After a longish silence, students began to exchange confused glances. 'What's this?' the massier said. 'Are you refusing to undergo the Or deal? Do you decline to describe your first tumble?'

His voice admirably calm, Jean-Baptiste answered, 'I have not refused. I have done as you require.'

'What? But I don't understand. How can your first—' Then the terrible truth dawned upon them. The massier's mouth dropped open and his eyes grew huge. 'Are you telling us that you are still a..virgin?'

Another spoke in tones hushed with awe. 'What? Is he claiming that his wick has never been dipped?'

'Is such a thing possible? ..even in the south?'

'And the man calls himself a painter!'

Despite the throb of fury in his temples, Jean-Baptiste spoke firmly. 'I am not ashamed of my chastity, gentlemen. My uncle, the Abbé de Lhande, has often warned me of the dangers to the soul—to say nothing of the body—of promiscuity, and he cautioned me to— '

'His uncle is a priest?!'

'I believe "uncle" is the conventional euphemism," the clown informed his colleagues. 'No doubt his mother was one of the Abbé's flock who received the unusual penance of being obliged to lie back and spread— '

Jean-Baptiste's restrain burst! With the roar of a wounded animal he leapt from the platform and flattened the clown with his fist! Two others sought to grasp his arms, but he shook them off and snatched up the nearest easel and, spinning on his heel and holding the cumbersome weapon before him, he forced his antagonists to fall back! A brave soul attempted to dash into the circle of danger to subdue this raging madman, but he was rewarded with a bash that sent him skidding across the floor.

From the safety of a distant table top, the massier shouted encouragement and directions to his troops, while Alexandre Montresault retreated into a corner and began to sketch the battle scene with rapid, adroit strokes. The harried Basque let the easel fly from his grip and it crashed against the wall. He snatched up a maulstick and drove back the nearest of his antagonists, making good use of his years of training with the singlestick and the Basque makila, jabbing them in the ribs with just enough force to produce satisfying little grunts

of pain.

Tormentors from the back ranks introduced artillery into the battle in the form of wadded up rags, juicy with fresh paint. Slipping in greasy smears of paint, Jean-Baptiste snatched up a water jug and, leaping onto the posing platform to return fire, sent the jug whistling across the studio where it crashed within only centimetres of the head of…

..Maître Garnier!

Fate, eternal tormentor of the Young, had chosen this moment to bring the academy's master into the studio at the head of a group of visitors from the gratin of society who had come to witness and admire his pedagogical techniques.

The combatants stood frozen, missiles and weapons poised above their heads, fear and embarrassment ossifying them into a tableau of battle.

For three interminable seconds, the tension of total silence was broken only by little popping sounds from Maître Garnier's mouth, which opened and closed like a fish gasping out of water, and by the soft scratch of Alexandre Montresault's charcoal stick as it flashed over his sheet, capturing details of the scene..A thick splotch of paint oozing down the wall..Maître Garnier's bulging eyes..The expressions of fashionable women of Maître Garnier's party..stunned..too shocked to shriek..too fascinated to flee..and the focus of all eyes was Jean-Baptiste, who stood on the posing platform, rooted with anguish and shame, his naked body spattered with paint and glistening with perspiration.

Just as this brittle moment seemed about to snap with tension, a member of the visiting party, a tall gentleman dressed all in black, threw back his head and laughed richly. The grip of astonishment broken, the room dissolved into a chaos of noise and motion as students scurried to tidy the debris of combat and to rescue their precious show canvasses from the holocaust. The massier hastened to Maître Garnier's side to explain over the din that none of this was his fault and that, indeed, he had done everything humanly possible to avoid… Women of the visiting party gasped and fanned their flushed throats with minute handkerchiefs while assuring one another in voices breathless with outrage that they had never been subjected to such indignity in their lives, never!…Their gentlemen escorts scowled and declared that something should be done about this! And soon too, by God! Now, if they were in charge of these young rascals..Well, huh, huh—and that's not all! And all this while, Jean-Baptiste's hectic efforts to don his pantaloons without exposing either his front or his back to the onlookers succeeded only in exposing both.

One woman stood apart from the others, the corners of her eyes crinkled with amusement. The Baronne de Vauxville-Chaumont was the Tout Paris' reigning arbiter of fashion and taste, a role conceded even by those rivals who never missed an opportunity to point out that her personal life left much to be desired, as did her respect for tradition and protocol, as evinced by her quixotic

insistance on using one of the minor titles she had inherited. In response to this criticism she pointed out that 'Vauxville-Chaumont', mere barony though it might be, contained rich vowels and no harsh consonants, while her ducal title was as dysphonious and is was distinguished.

This admired (but envied), and hated (but emulated) leader of fashion stood gazing with undisguised interest, not upon the paint-spattered nudity of the handsome Basque as the other women felt obliged to do despite their shock and disgust, but upon the feverish eyes of young Alexandre Montresault who continued to capture the scene from his perch in the corner, totally absorbed in a clinical concentration.

After hopping around the slippery platform for a seeming eternity, Jean-Baptiste managed to stuff first one leg then the other into his tangled trousers. Giving up his search for his under-drawers, his shirt, his neckcloth and one of his boots, he decided to pull on his plum-coloured coat and make as dignified a presence as possible. He dragged his fingers through his hair, tugged down the lapels of his rumpled coat and, lifting his chin bravely, he stepped forward to offer explanations and apologies, one-booted, bare-chested beneath his open coat, smears of paint on cheek and throat, the long tails of his coat flapping against his calves. He approached the most distinguished of the visiting party, the man dressed all-in-black whose laugh had shattered that ghastly frozen silence, and bowed with rigid dignity. 'Allow me to introduce myself, Maître Garnier, and to explain the deplorable scene that greeted you when— '

'I am Hyacinthe Garnier, young man!' snapped the least distinguished–looking of the group, stepping forward and fixing the lad with a imperious glare that was dangerously risible, coming from this flabby little butter–ball whose ear-high neckstock failed to contain his waddles, whose oily forehead curls failed to conceal a retreating hairline, and whose waxed goatee failed to disguise a weak chin.

'You?' the young Basque asked, unable to accept that this pudgy clown could be the great Maître Garnier until a frown and a minimal nod from the man all-in-black caused him to add suddenly, 'Ah! Of Course! Maître Garnier!' He bowed again. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde.'

Maître Garnier's expression revealed no hint of recognition.

'..Ah..but surely you recall, sir, that I was recommended by your long-time friend and colleague, M. Hector Hastoy. (Still no sign of recognition) ..Of Bayonne?'

'Hastoy? Hastoy? Oh yes. Some sort of drawing master. From the south somewhere.'

'Ah..Just so, sir. I am the new student M. Hastoy recommended to your attention.'

'As to that, young man, I consider it most doubtful that you will become a student here! Most doubtful! I require a full explanation of the savage

behaviour I was met with!' The ranine eyes bulged and little goatee trembled with rage as he turned to the massier. 'Well, sir? Is this how you maintain discipline in my school? Who is responsible for this disgraceful display of bare-faced barbarism? ..And not only ba refaced! Well?'

While the massier groped for an explanation that would exclude himself from quilt and yet seem feasible, Jean-Baptiste limped forward on his single boot and bowed for a third time. 'I accept full responsibility, sir.' He glanced towards the massier, expecting him, as a gentleman, to insist that the blame be shared; but his erstwhile antagonist maintained the judicious silence of a man torn between a his responsibility towards the Truth and his disinclination to inform on a fellow student.

'I see,' pronounced the Maître ponderously. 'Well, In that case, I have no alternative but to— ' A deep frown creased his forehead beneath the oiled comma of a curl, as he stared in horror at Jean-Baptiste's hand. 'What is that object you keep waving about?'

'Sir?' Jean-Baptiste looked down and noticed for the first time the cloth he was clutching in his fist. No wonder he had been unable to find his under-drawers! 'This, sir? Ah..did you ask me what..this..ah..is?' He foraged desperately through his imagination to come up with a description of the garment that did not oblige him to utter its damning name.

Two of the fashionable ladies had been obliged to retire, whimpering and limp, to the models' dressing room to recover from the assault on their sensibilities caused by the scene of naked combat; but before long an uncomfortable feeling that they were being left out of things prompted them to marshal their moral courage and allow their solicitous escorts to lead them back into the studio, which they now entered, leaning heavily on supporting arms, fanning themselves with minute lace handkerchiefs. They joined the group behind the Maître, and it seemed to Jean-Baptiste that every eye in the studio was riveted upon the cloth he was trying to crush into a ball in his palm, and every mouth was silently forming the word: Under-drawers!

'Well?' Maître Garnier repeated, a vein in his forehead throbbing. 'Are you going to answer me or not? What is that..object?'

'You ask what this is, sir,' our Basque said hopelessly. 'Well..ah… And you have every right to ask. Yes, indeed! ..Every..right.' Suddenly Jean-Baptiste became aware that the gentleman all-in-black was looking on with a smile of amusement. He turned to him. 'Sir! Are you laughing at me?'

The smile evaporated and the gentleman regarded the young man with cool surprise. 'I don't believe I've had the good fortune to make your acquaintance,' he said evenly.

'Whether or not it's your good fortune depends on your answer to my question, sir. Were you laughing at me? '

So disconcerted was Jean-Baptiste by embarrassment and frustration that he failed to notice the breathless apprehension with which the onlookers

regarded the gentleman, who lazily surveyed the bristling young man from his paint-stained face to his bare toes. The gentlemen visitors drew back to avoid involvement, and the students of the academy paused in their tidying up to exchange frightened looks.

This tension resulted from the fact that everyone, save Jean-Baptiste, was aware that the gentleman in black was Count Philippe d'Orsini, known by the theatrical, but decidedly accurate, title: the Black Rose of Death, which derived from his theatrical habit of dress, and from his lethal reputation as the most capable duelist in Paris. So it is hardly surprising that every onlooker at the Garnier Academy held his breath when Jean-Baptiste, concealing his bare foot behind his shod one, repeated, 'Well, sir? Were you laughing at me?! Yes or no?!'

The silence was viscous with apprehension. D'Orsini's ironic glance rested on the young artist for a long, lethal moment…. then he smiled and said, 'Not at all, my young friend. It isn't you I find amusing. It's merely… the circumstances.'

'Oh, indeed? Well, sir, I don't find the present circumstances amusing in the slightest!'

'Don't you, young man?' intervened the Baronne de Vauxville -Chaumont in her warm contralto, her attention leaving the face of Alexandre Montresault for the first time since her arrival. She realised that d'Orsini had already made what was, for him, a maximal gesture of conciliation, and she knew that this unfortunate young man was teetering, quite unknowingly, on the edge of infinity.

'No, Madame,' our Basque said, bowing again and softening the harsh tone of his voice, 'I find nothing amusing in another person's embarrassment.'

She tipped her head to one side and raised her eyebrows. 'Oh, really? As a favour to me, please try to picture the scene that greeted us when we entered.'

Unwilling to be thought a surly bore by this grand lady, Jean-Baptiste forced himself to imagine the wild chaos the visitors had in blundered in upon, with himself standing in the centre of the mêlée, stark naked, throwing and dodging missiles of every description. Despite himself, a sketch of a smile softened lips hitherto compressed with anger.

'Ah! You see? Now let's clean you up a bit. Come here and give me that…painting rag…you are clutching in your hand,' the Baronne commanded in a mock–stern tone.

With the uncomfortable sensation that the stiff Basque dignity that had thus far supported him against the antagonistic world of Paris was beginning to crumble, Jean-Baptiste stepped forward and offered her his waded-up underpants, which she accepted gravely and applied herself to the task of wiping a splash of brilliant green from his forehead. 'There now. That's better,' she said. 'My soul, what a handsome young devil you are! And that poetic southern accent of yours! How many girlish hearts you must have

melted!'

One of the students who had been witness his confession of virginity snorted, but Jean-Baptiste skewered him with a threatening stare.

'Now,' the Baronne continued 'you do believe, don't you, that neither I nor the Count d'Orsini have the slightest intention of offending you?'

'I assure you,' d'Orsini added, 'that I would have acted exactly as you did, given the circumstances. Though, in honesty, I am obliged to add that I cannot conceive of being in exactly those circumstances.'

Jean-Baptiste looked from one face to the other. In both pairs of eyes he found gentle amusement that seemed to include him in the joke, not make him the object of it.

'May I keep this—or these—as a memento of a most diverting afternoon?' the Baronne asked, indicating the cloth in her hand.

Jean-Baptiste strove to contain a grin. 'Normally, Madame, I would never deny a lady a request. But, alas, my baggage has been misplaced, and that is the only..ah..painting rag that I possess.'

The three of them laughed, and the tension was gone.

Maître Garnier, however, was not disposed to join in the merriment. He knew only too well how his colleagues of the Academy would spread—and probably embellish!—the tale of this outrageous episode. He would be the object of their ridicule. Rage bloating his face, he addressed the renegade student responsible for his blemish on his reputation. 'Clothe yourself, young man! Collect your impedimenta! And..go! I never want to see your face here again! ..Nor any other part of you, for that matter!'

'But, sir— '

'Out of my sight!'

His spirit crushed by the multiple misfortunes that had befallen him since his arrival in Paris a mere two hours ago and by the knowledge that his career, in total disregard of nautical logic, had run aground before it had set sail, Jean-Baptiste gathered up the shreds of his dignity, bowed gently over the Baronne's hand, more stiffly to the Count, and nodded curtly to Maître Garnier before striding away (the heroic pathos of his exit somewhat diminished by his one-shoe limp) to collect his scattered clothing among the easels of the students, each of whom was applying himself to his work with a frowning absorption calculated to suggest that he, for one, had played no part in the disgraceful fracas and was, in any case, much, much too busy to be questioned about it. But the innocence of some was cast into doubt by their bruises and paint-stained clothing, and there were others who stared with forlorn eyes at the ripped and broken 'show' canvasses on the easels before them.

When Jean-Baptiste had departed into the model's dressing room, the Maître addressed his guests, apologising for the inexcusable behaviour of the students, who were obviously made of shabbier stuff than the students of his own day. 'I'm afraid this is not a favourable time for you to draw a just opinion

of my methods, as the students are excited and— '

'Nonsense,' dismissed the Baronne de Vauxville-Chaumont. 'I am particularly anxious to visit with this star pupil of yours, the one that all Paris is wagering will run away with the Prix de Rome.'

'Ah, yes. That would be young Montresault! A magnificent talent!' Garnier said, eager to salvage what he could from the ruins. 'I always give credit to my students where credit is due, and I can say of Montresault that he has shown a remarkable ability to absorb a good deal of my teaching. Indeed…' He turned to include all his guests in his forth coming jest, his eyes shining with the anticipated humour of it. '..In deed, some say that, in one or two little tricks, he has taken an edge over his teacher!' The visitors joined Garnier in a light titter at the absurd idea.

'Can you guess which one is the famous Montresault?' the Maître asked, drying his eyes from the effects of his wit with the corner of a large yellow silk handkerchief.

'Of course,' the Baronne said. 'he's the one over there in the corner. The pale young man with the smouldering eyes.'

'Upon my soul!' Garnier avowed. 'Amazing! I confess that even I, their beloved mentor, occasionally have trouble distinguishing one from another.'

'Ah, but the Baronne has an astronomer's gift for discovering tomorrow's brightest stars,' Count d'Orsini suggested.

'In this case, it isn't all that difficult, ' the Baronne confessed. 'There's genius in his eyes.'

'Ah, true,' Maître Garnier said, pulling his most serious face. 'It's in the eyes. I constantly implore my students to use their eyes.' He turned to the group of visitors. 'Of course the hand is important too, because the craft resides in the hand. But it is in the eyes that one finds the difference between mediocrity and excellence. If I've told them once, I've told them a thousand times: Use your eyes! Look, I tell them. Observe, I plead. But..alas…' His arms flapped to his sides and he shook his head wearily. Obviously, some young men never learn,, no matter how often you tell them. 'Ah well,' he said with a sigh, 'One does one's best.'

There was a general coo of sympathy, and one of the ladies laid a comforting hand the Maître's shoulder, while the others exchanged earnest views on Art, on Beauty, and on the dismal quality of modern students, from the buzz of which talk the words 'eyes' and 'hands' emerged often.

'May we meet your young genius?' d'Orsini asked.

'But of course! He would be honoured!' Garnier replied. 'Please follow me.' Over his shoulder he spoke to the group of visitors. 'Honoured guests, please feel free to circulate among my students and favour them with your comments and criticisms. They will appreciate any guidance you might wish to offer.'

Lids drooped over student eyes.

As he conducted the Baronne and the Count through the forest of easels, Maître Garnier spoke out of the side on his mouth. 'I must forewarn you that young Montresault can be somewhat curt. Downright arrogant, in fact. He affects to be unimpressed by praise. Even mine! Ah, the sublimely blind confidence of youth! Something he will outgrow, I have no doubt.'

When they arrived at Alexandre Montresault's easel, he was just replacing the cap on a pocket flask after taking a long pull.

'Well, well, how's our work going, Montresault?' Garnier greeted with heavy camaraderie, patting his pupil's shoulder.

'Our work, Maître?' the young man replied as he selected a brush and scrubbed it into his palm to soften its bristles. 'My work is coming along as well as can be expected in this madhouse. As for yours…? Well, I suppose we'd have to ask your apprentices.'

Maître Garnier forced a chuckle and arched his eyebrows as though to say: You see what I mean? Who can understand these modern young people? 'We have visitors, Montresault! They've done us the honour of expressing a desire to meet you particularly.'

Alexandre's concentration remained on his canvass. '…How… extra-ordinarily…nice,' he drawled.

Garnier laughed nervously, and the Baronne and the Count exchanged glances, recognising in the young painter's voice the dry, superior tone that characterised 'clever' conversation in their social class. Clearly, despite the rumpled workman's smock, this young man was 'one of us'.

The Maître cleared his throat. 'Ah…Madame la Baronne Vauxville-Chaumont, Monsieur le Comte d'Orsini, allow me to present my prize student, the young man who has—if I dare risk spoiling him with flattery—most benefited from the principles and techniques I seek to impart to all of my—'

'I am Alexandre Montresault,' the young man interrupted, setting aside his brush and palette and making a shallow bow to the Count before receiving the hand of the Baronne and bending over it. 'Please forgive me if I appear brusque. I am mindful of the honour you do me, but I am working. And time is precious.'

'We quite understand,' the Baronne said graciously. 'But surely, at your age, one has oceans of time.'

'On the contrary, Madame la Baronne. I have little time to spend, and none at all to waste.'

'Oh?' Her amused eyes searched his. 'But don't you offer yourself occa-sional relaxation and pleasure?'

'Work is my pleasure, Madame.'

'Your…only pleasure?'

'I'm afraid so. I'm really a very dull fellow.'

'Indeed?' the Baronne asked. 'But are you aware that all across Paris bets are being laid that this "very dull fellow" will walk off with the Prix de Rome

six months hence.'

'I'm not much attracted by the notion of art as a competitive sport, Madame. Particularly when the prize is an opportunity to join the ranks of Entrenched Mediocrity.'

'Well, well!' interjected Maître Garnier. 'I can't devote all my time to one student, however talented. It is my duty to offer a touch of guidance here, a word of encouragement there. Perhaps you would care to accompany me and observe my methods?'

'I think not,' the Count said flatly.

'Oh? Ah…Well…' And with a deep bow he left them to make his monthly tour of the canvasses.

D'Orsini looked after him. 'And it is to such as he that we entrust our talented young.'

When he and the Baronne turned back to speak to Alexandre, he was just wiping his lips after a draw from his flask. 'A medicine,' he explained after suppressing a cough. 'A sort of…anodyne.'

The Baronne leaned against the window frame, causing the harsh, unforgiving light to blossom in her hair, rather than explore her face…the instinctive gesture of a beautiful woman no longer in her first youth. 'Now then, Alexandre Montresault,' she said in mocking imitation of the tone of a judge taking evidence. 'You stand accused of holding the Prix de Rome in contempt, while any other aspiring artist would give ten years out of his life for the honour. Do I detect a hint of artistic coquetry in this disdain? Or is it simply that it is incumbent upon a young artist to play the role of the embittered martyr now and then.'

Stung by her observation, for it contained a seed of distasteful truth, Alexandre turned back to his canvass saying, 'It has been an inestimable pleasure to chat with you, Madame. But I must return to work.' And with this he bowed curtly and returned his attention to his canvass.

The Baronne laughed richly. 'How wonderful! Oh, Philippe, I think I am going to like this young man!'

'…Oh, really?' the Count said dryly.

'Yes. I envy artists their freedom. But I, alas, possess no creative skills.'

'Well, you could still become a teacher,' Alexandre suggested. Then suddenly his shoulders slumped and he turned back to her. '…I…beg you to forgive me, Madame, for being an ill-mannered lout. I've been in an umber mood of late, and I— ' He shrugged.

The Baronne laid her hand on his arm. 'You mustn't surrender to doubts and fears, dear Alexandre. You have a great talent. A flame burns within you. In recognition of which, I should like to make you a proposal. You see, Alexandre, I have a reputation to uphold, and— '

'She's being too modest,' d'Orsini interposed. 'She has several reputations to uphold, and three or four to live down.'

'Hush, Philippe! I have a reputation for discovering young artists, writers, musician just before they burst upon Paris in all their glory. It's one of my little vanities.'

'Again you're too modest, Marguerite,' the Count admonished. 'No one could describe your vanities as "little".'

'Enough, Philippe! I have decided, Alexandre, to have my portrait done.'

The Count's eyebrows lifted a fraction of a centimetre. 'When did you decide that?'

'About…oh…three minutes ago.'

'…ah…'

'But, my dear Alexandre, although my decision was recent, I'm impatient to have the portrait done quickly, before the last vestiges of my youth fade…' There was just the slightest pause to permit the injection of an objection, and when none came she continued smoothly, '…and I have chosen you to undertake the onerous task. What do you say to that?'

'I am, of course, honoured. But I don't do portraits.'

'And I, for my part, have never sat as a model. We'll be sharing a new experience. And that might prove interesting. Well?' She awaited his response, her eyes shining with amusement and…something else.

'But won't your friends think it odd? Having yourself painted by a mere student?'

'Oh, come now! No one thinks of you as a "mere student". You least of all! Well? Is it agreed?'

Alexandre considered for a long moment. "…Well…I could use the money, God knows."

'Splendid!'

'Could you possibly pay me a little something in advance?'

'Listen to the mercenary rogue, Philippe! Alexandre, you quite shatter my image of the artist as a rarefied being totally indifferent to material gain.'

'I don't mean to clast your icons, Madame, but the life of a struggling young painter is not all quaint poverty, nose-thumbing at bourgeoisie values, outrageous pranks, and free love. There is also hunger, cold, despair, failure, disappointment—all of which, our mentors assure us, are excellent for developing our character. Is that not so, Maître?'

This was addressed to Maître Garnier as he rejoined them. When the Baronne told him of her intention to have Alexandre do her portrait, his pudgy features passed rapidly through confusion and envy before he managed to produce a flaccid imitation of enthusiasm. 'Well, well, Montresault, you lucky scamp! So the Baronne has chosen you for her portrait? What condescension! I dare say your ship of fame is launched! Eh? Eh?'

'I am honoured and pleased, of course…' At this moment, an amusing possibility dawned upon him, one that would let him do a service to a fellow artist and punish the Maître a little at the same time. And some men deserve

punishment, not only for what they do, but for what they are. Alexandre assumed his most sombre expression and drew a deep sigh. 'But, alas, my pleasure is diminished by the knowledge that I shall be unable to bear the standard of the Garnier Academy in the competition for the Prix de Rome.'

'What!? How's that?' The Maître's cheeks flapped with flustered irritation. 'What are you saying!? Unable to enter the competition?'

'Oh, I'll enter the competition, Maître. Never fear. It's only that…well, I shall be obliged to represent some other school.'

'What? What? What? Represent some other school!'

'No, no, you mustn't blame yourself, Maître. It's not your fault! Discipline must be maintained.'

'Discipline? Discipline? What in God's name are you babbling about!'

'You were obliged to throw my cousin out of the academy. I don't blame you a bit. You had every right to do so. Indeed, it was your duty!'

The Count and the Baronne exchanged glances and stepped back slightly to observe the scene without involvement.

'Your cousin? But…but…I had no idea that scamp was your cousin.'

'Well, you know how we are in the south, sir. All related in one way or another. Something to do with the long summer nights and nothing much to occupy our time.' Alexandre took up his brush and returned to his work, speaking with the airy drawl of a man whose mind is elsewhere. 'It's a pity, of course…but…' He shrugged.

'But? But? But what?'

'Well…I promi sed to look after my cousin while he established himself in Paris. Naturally, now that he has been dismissed from here—(Excuse me, Maître, but would you step back a little? You're blocking my light. Ah, that's better. Oh, and please forgive the metaphor.) Now that he has been dismissed—perfectly justifiably!—I shall have to go with him to whatever academy will accept us both. Tell me, Maître, do you think this diagonal cutting across the foreground lends energy and— '

'Are you saying that you intend to enter the competition under the ægis of another academy?'

'Well…yes, of course. If someone will accept me.'

'Oh, they'll accept you all right!' the Maître sputtered. 'The grasping bastards! (Oh, excuse me, Baronne) And after all I've done for you! The knowledge I have imparted! The skills! The affection I've lavished!'

Alexandre nodded compassionately. 'It does seem unjust. But…'

'Unjust?! It's criminal! It's downright —' The Maître snapped his mouth shut and narrowed his eyes in an effort to think his way out of this disaster. 'Listen. Listen. Where is that wild young bastard— (Oh, do excuse me, Baronne). Where is your cousin?'

'I believe he withdrew to make some minor adjustments in his apparel,' Alexandre said. 'But never fear, I'll give him the tongue-lashing he deserves

when I get him home. Oh, may I leave my materials here overnight? Just until I can collect them tomorrow?'

'Now just a moment, Montresault. Just a moment. You mustn't be too hard on this cousin of yours, this…ah…what was the young fellow's name?'

Alexandre's eyes flickered as he strove to recall the young Basque's name.

'Jean-Baptiste Cariquiriborde,' Comte d'Orsini offered. 'I could hardly forget it. He threw it in my face as though it were a glove.'

'Cariquiriborde?' the Baronne asked in a voice tinged with awe, as she nudged d'Orsini with her elbow. 'Of the Cariquiribordes? Oh! Well, I simply must have him to supper before all the hostesses of Paris descend on him like vultures!'

'One the Cariquiribordes?' the Maître asked.

'Yes, but his exalted name doesn't excuse his vulgar behaviour, sir,' Alexandre insisted. 'What does it matter if the man's veins pulse with the blood of kings? His behaviour was so despicable that he merits no— '

'What? ' Garnier interjected. 'The blood of kings, you say?'

'Well, yes…for what that's worth,' Alexandre shrugged and bent over his painting.

'Worth?' the Maître asked. 'Worth? The trouble with this generation is that it's lost all respect for history, for ancient and noble families, for—not to put too fine a point on it—tradition. But my dear Montresault!' He looked to the ceiling and lifted his palms, as though to ask the Powers how his intentions could have been so misinterpreted. 'My dear Montresault, what on earth made you think I was going to dismiss the poor fellow for some trivial peccadillo? What was his great crime, when you come down to it? Youthful high spirits! Nothing more!'

'Oh but surely my cousin must accept just punishment for his—'

'Justice! That's all this generation thinks think about! It's justice this and justice that! What about compassion, eh? Eh? An artist must have a heart!' He struck his breast a solid thump and raised his voice so that both students and visiting gentlefolk might benefit from his philosophy. 'While I have always insisted that the eye is important and the hand indispensable, it is the heart that animates the work of an artist. Train your eye…certainly! Refine your hand…to be sure! But also teach your heart to rise above the narrow constraints of mere justice! Be compassionate! Oh, how difficult it is to implant these noble concepts in the young!'

The visitors nodded soberly to one another as they muttered in agreement: Yes, the hand. Yes, the eye. But above all, the heart! Ah-h…the heart.

After retiring to the model's dressing room to don the clothing he had collected from the four corners of the studio, Jean-Baptiste had sat for a long time, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. How swiftly capricious Fate can demolish all one's hopes! For a full quarter of an hour he abandoned

himself to his misery; then he stood up, took a deep breath, adjusted his neckcloth, and squared his shoulders. He would speak to Maître Garnier. He would apologise—but without servility—then he would stride out of the academy, never to return. He had always dreamed of accepting glory and fame with humility. Well, now he would accept defeat with dignity. Like a man. More importantly..like a Basque!

As he approached the small group around Alexandre Montresault's easel, Jean-Baptiste repeated under his breath the dignified apology he had rehearsed. He would say his piece, then turn on his heel and walk out. But just as he opened his mouth to apologise, the Maître turned and beamed warmly upon him. 'Ah, here he is now, our high-spirited new student!'

'Sir, I want to— '

'No, no, Monsieur Cariquiriborde, don't give the matter another thought. We all have little embarrassing moments tucked away in our memories somewhere. Ah, youth! Youth!'

'Yes, but— '

'I have asked your cousin here not to be too severe with you.'

'..My cousin?'

The Baronne stepped forward and gave him her hand. 'You must promise to send your card around as soon as you are established.'

'..My car d?'

'I shall arrange an intimate little supper at your earliest convenience.' She squeezed his hand very firmly. 'Now, you mustn't snub me. That would be most naughty of you, Monsieur Cariquiriborde.'

'..Snub you?'

'Perhaps,' Count d'Orsini suggested, ' you could find time to take a glass with me one of these days, sir.'

'..A glass?'

'Come now, you mustn't hold our little contretemps against me. Let bygones be bygones.'

Jean-Baptiste could not avoid the suspicion that he was not totally master of the moment, but his training in old-fashioned etiquette obliged him to say to the Count, 'I should be delighted to allow the matter to drop, sir. And may I say how pleased I am not to be required to teach you a lesson in good manners.'

D'Orsini's eyelids drooped. 'Yes..well... We must be on our way. No doubt you have work to do, Monsieur Cariquiriborde.'

'That's very true,' Maître Garnier said. 'After all, young man, you are still the studio rapin, a Cariquiriborde or not. Royal blood or not. There is a great egalitarianism in art. Or—put more usefully—Art creates its own nobility. Come, ladies and gentlemen! We must be off. The young men must work. Hard work is the foundation of all great art. An artist must have eyes, and a hand, and a heart; but above all, he must be capable of hard work! If I've said this once, I've said it a hundred times, but...'

..As the gaggle of visitors departed in the Maître's wake, they confessed to one another that it had always been their opinion that hard work was the quintessential attribute of the successful artist—not that they were insensitive to the values of hand, eye, and heart. After all, art creates its own nobility, does it not? A nobility of the eye. A nobility of the heart. A nobility of the hand.

Nobility of the hand?

Well..ah..metaphorically speaking, of course.

Lingering a moment, the Baronne reminded young Montresault of his promise to do her portrait. 'I'll send you a note, Alexandre, suggesting days that would be convenient for me to sit.' Then with a gracious smile and a wave that included all the students in the atelier, she swept from the room.

Before following her, d'Orsini pressed two gold coins into Montresault's palm, the advance payment the Baronne had promised but then, typically, forgotten.

The students gathered around Jean-Baptiste, clapping him on the back and grasping his hand, each striving to be first to introduce himself. The young Basque was baffled by his sudden popularity, which, as best he could make out, had something to do with his standing up 'the Black Rose'. ..Whatever in hell a 'black rose' was.

Even the massier muttered a few reluctant words of gratitude for Jean-Baptiste's having assumed full responsibility for the fiasco, but he quickly reasserted his authority by reminding the new rapin that there was cleaning up to do before he could go home.

After the students had left in a laughing, noisy gaggle, shouting and slamming doors, the great empty barn seemed to ring with silence.

Jean-Baptiste looked about at mess of the great combat, and he sighed at the prospect of bringing any order to this primordial chaos. He made a half-hearted stab at arranging the piles of rubble, litter, and rags into somewhat tidier piles of rubble, litter, and rags, while in the far corner Alexandre Montresault, whose habit it was to stay and work after the others had gone, continued to paint with that insulated attention characteristic of him.

'What was all this nonsense about my having a cousin?' Jean-Baptiste asked as he stacked the water pots in a corner, his voice echoing in the empty atelier.

'..Damned if I know,' Alexandre said in an elsewhere voice. 'Somehow, the Maître got the impression that you and I were cousins.'

'Cousins? A Basque and a Béarnais? Ridiculous!'

'What do northerners know?'

Jean-Baptiste continued his desultory cleaning, pestering the floor with a diseased old broom that sent billows of pastel dust into the pale, slanting rays of sunlight, which optical effect he observed dreamily, leaning on his broom like a municipal employee. 'Perhaps they were right to laugh and call me a hayseed,' he mused. 'Look at me. I came to Paris to become a painter, and here I am

wielding a broom. I've only been here a few hours and already I've been robbed, ridiculed, cheated, stripped naked, bombarded with paint pots, most of my money has melted away, my trunk has gone adrift somewhere, I've been obliged to teach that gentleman in black a lesson in manners, and someone's stolen my brand new painting case!'

Alexandre smiled as he smudged the edge of a charcoal line with his thumb. 'It happens to us all. Paris robs us first of our possessions…then our innocence…and finally our illusions. Have you found digs yet?'

'My drawing-master in Bayonne…M. Hastoy?…arranged quarters for me not far from here. On the Street of the Four Winds.'

'The Street of the Four Winds! But we're neighbours, you and I!' Alexandre held his sketchpad out at arm's length and examined his work, his eyes narrowed charily. He shook his head and sighed.

Jean-Baptiste inspected the sketch over Alexandre's shoulder. 'Magnificent! The way you capture character with the merest ghost of a line! Look at old Maître Garnier! Eyes popping like a fish out of water! Oh, and that beautiful lady who was speaking to you! What mischief in her glance! And look how you've caught the cocky swagger of that oddly dressed—wait a minute! Oh but, surely I didn't look that ridiculous! Well…perhaps I did. You have a great gift. Compared to you, I'm a dauber who might as well paint with this broom as with a brush.'

'If you handle a charcoal stick half as well as you handled that maul stick this afternoon, you're a talent to be reckoned with.'

'Bof, that's just fighting,' Jean-Baptiste dismissed with a shrug. 'All Basques can fight. It's in our marrow.'

Alexandre tore out the pages of sketches, wadded them up, and tossed them onto the pile of dust and potshards Jean-Baptiste had amassed in the middle of the floor. 'I'll help you latch the windows and set the lock. Then we can walk home together…cousin.'

Jean-Baptiste tossed his broom into a corner. 'Cousin!'

***

And they become instant friends. They go together to the crooked little street (The Street of the Four Winds) where they fall in with the handful of fellow artists, all devoted to the cause of the suffering masses…obviously, all young and poor, and who constitute the ***Cenacle of Saint Simplimus****, with whom our reader will share love, passion, hunger, and the delight of creation, the outrage of social injustice and the exclusive philistine machinery of the art establishment. Their passion for life and their commitment to each other draw them into the great street battles of 1848, where they punctuate their youth with days spent fighting in the barricades.*

Note to the Reader

Now you have met most of the major characters of the novel, all different, all colourful, each with his or her particular dreams and troubles. If you would like to read more of *Street of the Four Winds*, then go on-line here, and tell us what you think. Gravity Publishing is trying to find a way to make a special edition of this wonderful book available to all Trevanian's readers, and welcomes your opinion.

Street of the Four Winds is the second of two important Internet give-aways that Trevanian has devised for his intensely supportive fans around the world.

The first was what he called a **Cybernotes Companion** to his latest novel *The Crazyladies of Pearl Street*, published in the US by Crown, 4 June 2005. **Crazyladies** is the coming of age story of a boy in the slums of Albany in the years immediately preceding the Second World War. Although the book is a complete whole, Trevanian' s Cybernotes contain additional details, cultural references, web links and commentary on many of the themes of the book that will resonate with the reader' s experience of the novel. The cybernotes can be downloaded from trevanian.com in a PDF file format (also in a zip file for those with slow connections). Radio shows and music from the era can also be found at the site.

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Biographical notes and more can be found here: http://www.trevanian.com/tdesk/tbio.htm

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