

The Closed Harbour

James Hanley



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James Hanley (1897–1985)



A young James Hanley



James Hanley's wife Dorothy
(Timmy)



From left to right, Margaret, Gerald and Bridget,
James Hanley's sister, brother and mother

The Closed Harbour

1

CERTAINLY HE WAS NOTICEABLE ON THE AVENUE; people stared at him as he passed by. The hard light of the sun was upon him, boring at his blackness, for he was black from head to foot, from his reefer jacket with its captain's insignia to his shiny peaked cap pulled sharply down on the forehead. A stranger perhaps, but how oddly dressed, and on such a day. The avenue was long; the pavement seemed moving under the heat's pressure. It was half-past four in the afternoon. He walked on, oblivious of those who passed by. He was unduly tall, very thin; he was certainly lost within the folds of his reefer, a threat to winter.

But making his way up, Marius saw nothing save the decrepit-looking building behind the Rue Lens. It was his vision up the desert, past the shops with their brightly coloured awnings, past the people in whom he was not interested, whom he scarcely saw as he moved forwards, with a hesitant, wide-rolling gait. He never removed his hands from the depths of his pockets, and he stared defiantly at what his vision defined as the horizon line of the Avenue Croille. It was the ritual of determination, of defiance, of a certain hope in gullibility and forgetfulness; it was the day's stirring of the bones, setting in motion for the thousandth time the machinery of misery, the endless day. Reaching the end of the avenue, he paused, glanced about him, then moved swiftly between the dividing line of two shops, the bright jeweller's and the cheap toy shop, down a cool narrow alley, and so into the light again. And there he saw the building.

He stopped dead in his tracks, like a clockwork engine suddenly run down. The Company Heros and M. Philippe. Even the red bricks knew Marius; the windows stared at him like eyes, the stone steps, the brazen door that shut so often on the misery, the hugged misery inside the reefer, burdensome as his own flesh. The toot of a horn made him jump. He moved towards the Company Heros, Philippe bound. He mounted the steps, eased open the door with his body. He was in semi-darkness. Almost at once his nostrils were full of the strong smells: pitch, resin, Manila rope, oil. But the hall itself was cool. There were

the stairs to climb. They knew Marius, too. The office of the Marine Superintendent. Forwards.

He was there at last, and there was Monsieur Philippe, just as he was yesterday, very much himself, indifferent to visitors, always watching a clock, dreaming of home, his slippers, the roses in his garden. M. Philippe heard a movement, seemed to realize who it was. He glanced up at the clock, and so knew, and was linked with this, and the roses in his garden, his slippers, his favourite chair, the pleasure of his own person. Marius spoke.

Philippe barely noticed and he did not move. After all it was only yesterday's echo and the day before. Philippe had a coloured chart on the desk before him, and he continued to study it. He heard a match struck, and later drew in the aroma of Marius's cigarette. And he went on poring over the outspread chart, a hairy finger moving searchingly across it. It stopped, it had pinpointed Oran. He had completely forgotten his visitor.

Marius for his part leant heavily towards the desk; his body gave the impression that at any moment it might topple over M. Philippe and his attentive hairy finger. His elbows were pressed hard upon the glistening mahogany, through the surface of which he seemed to see a reflection that might be his own face. He was aware of the studied indifference of Monsieur Philippe, and the deep silence of the office, broken only by the fast tick of a clock that had the high prattling sound of a child. It seemed to accentuate the presence of the two men, the sheer physical weight of their bodies.

Again Marius spoke. The finger on the chart suddenly departed from Oran.

What did Marius want?

To see Monsieur Follet.

That would be quite impossible.

Marius stiffened. One day Monsieur Philippe would get a great surprise, a terrible shock; he would open his mouth to speak and only sawdust would fall out. Why, it was not yet five o'clock and the offices never closed till the moment of five, after all the Heros people were far too miserable ever to think of closing it a moment before.

Please, Marius said. He had come so many many times. There was a ship lying in the harbour, the *Clarte*, he had seen her, he knew Manos personally, she was loading for Salonika and other Greek ports, and

then on through the Black Sea. Would not Monsieur Follet see him? He was a patient man, he would wait; he had been here yesterday and the day before and the day before that, and last week and last month. Didn't he, Philippe realize what this meant – the endeavour, the hope, this land was only hell. He, Philippe had only to lift a finger, wink an eye, press a button, and Follet would see him, the magic door would open.

Monsieur Philippe stirred slightly.

Nevertheless the office was closed.

Marius drew himself up to full height; he dominated Philippe by nearly six inches. He willed the other to move, to look at him, and suddenly he moved, he looked up at Marius.

He first saw the shiny peaked cap, a three day growth of beard on the long sallow face, the bloodshot eyes. He noticed some wisps of straw adhering to the magnificent jacket. Its buttons were tarnished. He noticed the long thin hands, the powerful wrists protruding from the sleeves like pistons. Monsieur Marius must lengthen those sleeves. He met his eye. Marius met his. But think, for one moment, Marius seemed to say.

He, Monsieur Philippe, was a powerful man, and he, Marius, admitted it, cringed before him. A move could be a miracle, a lift of the finger all the difference between being upright and horribly stooping, turning a wonderful key. Why, if only Monsieur Philippe out of the goodness of his heart, turned this key, he, Marius, would hear it inside his brain like some great golden bell; he Marius, would be resurrected. He was drowned and his ship was drowned, they were like Lazarus, trying to rise, their eyes were clogged with death. Perhaps Monsieur Philippe would realize. The walk on this hot day had been a mile; going back it would be a desert-ridden thousand.

Nevertheless, M. Philippe said, the office was closed and Monsieur Follet was not available. He presumed Captain Marius – he paused to allow the mockery to sink in – he *presumed* he was of a certain intelligence. No doubt he had known, in the early days that M. Follet, too, was of a certain intelligence. But also there was moral integrity. Did he suppose Follet would forget himself? Did he not think it unwise to keep calling, pestering? The fact was there were no berths and that was the answer. There was nothing doing. Who knew better than he, Philippe? In life there was always a certain point to be reached, for good or bad, and he Marius had reached it. Did he not appreciate the

position? He had no ticket, he had lost his ticket. Dethroned captains did not rise again. It was a law of the sea that they should not; there was also a point where trust stopped.

He leant away from the desk; his eyes moved towards the door.

“Captain Marius, I believe that the sea would refuse to drown you.”

“And he will not see me?”

“He will not see you.”

“Then I must go?”

“If you must,” Philippe said, and he looked away, and downwards, and the finger was active again, and he had Oran, the red dot and the blue circle round it.

“Then Heros can congratulate itself,” Marius said.

He stood there, glaring at the man behind the counter, and he watched the finger and he watched the dot. There was a moment when the dot could shine as fierce as flame. Looking at the chart, Marius, for a fleeting moment saw the sea and the ship live, and breathe and draw him to her. His being longed, as suddenly froze.

“Am I to thank you?”

“It is customary, but not necessary,” Monsieur Philippe said.

“Damn you.”

Marius turned and went out; the swing door shut swiftly, smooth as a knife. Marius was in the dark again, lost again. He thought of the *Clarte* loading at the quay, he hoped it would sink from a mighty wave, burn, smash upon rocks. Damn him. Damn them.

The world was no longer wide. The sea was rolling up, the great expanse of it, the miles of it, narrowing, shutting out; they had turned the key again, those God-forsaken agents of the sea. Damn and blast them.

“I would have cringed, kissed his rotten feet.”

He went slowly down, dropped from stair to stair, heavily, aimlessly, there were no precise directions. And at the outer door he paused, looked through the glass. There they were, still at it, these people hurrying and scurrying, and that tram rocking as in a frenzy; the hard white light still there, and the walk home. The long walk home.

True, there were others, and he had tried others. If he could get out of here, out of this infernal port, he would never return, never, and he swore as he pushed again at the outer swing doors.

“I am as low as low – and it is not hard for them. They have their knives into me.”

He stood there, hesitant, watching, and he hated it. They were all a part of it, these indifferent people; what the hell did Philippe care anyhow? How he loathed the place, if *only* he could get away.

“As what? Nothing.”

He moved back into the avenue.

“Instead, I must walk back again, I must think again,” and it was no longer simple.

“Everything is simple until you are alone,” Marius exclaimed, as though he were addressing the red bricks that sheltered the hides of Philippe and Follet.

“Damn them!” he cried.

“She will be sitting there when I get back, they both will, like stones. They know things before I know them. They will draw me tomorrow’s map, describe my day by a look.”

“Where the hell are you going to?”

“What was that?” asked Marius, but the man had gone on, cursing him.

“If there were a road, a direction, a course set, I could drive myself to it, by my own will, and by the horror of this place. I’d give my heart to get out of it.”

He hardly realized he was in the bistro until he was up against the counter, feeling the cold wet brass of counter top under his hot hands.

“Cognac.” And louder, more demanding, “Coffee.”

Where had that thing come from on such a fine afternoon as this? And the barman raised his eyebrows.

At a table in the corner Marius talked to himself. He had talked to himself for a long time now, and, after all, it was better than no company. He could hear the heavy breathing of the occupant of a nearby table. He was a fat man, and Marius’s endless *sotto voce* upset his nerves. He banged down his glass and went out.

“The Heros – I spit at it. Closed, he said. Yet it was not yet five o’clock. Perhaps it is a dream after all. Yet they have seventeen ships and they are manned, and they have seventeen captains and they are as proud as peacocks. But I *will* find a ship; there is a certain place, if I can get to it – if... I’m not a bird and cannot fly, and unlike the Saviour I can’t walk it. But somehow I can see that ship, I can smell it, wondrous, aching as I ache, to be out of it, out of it.”

It was not far now. Already he could hear through the open window the loud rattle of winches. It made him think of Manos.

“Manos is old, very old, he might drop dead. Follet might send for me. I will then say, ‘go to hell’.”

“Cognac,” he shouted, and when it was brought, “more coffee.”

“There they go, I can hear them pounding away, she’s her head to the sea,” and again he thought of Manos, and the *Clarte* and the sea beyond.

When the cognac and coffee came, he drank both quickly, got up and went out.

He leant against the wall, his captain’s cap askew on his well-shaped head, covered with thick bluish-black hair. His hands disappeared again into the reefer pockets, the street seemed swarming with people, he watched Marseilles go by.

“I have been at many places, let me see – there was... Ah, but it is always the same. There are many captains, France is full of captains, the world stinks with them. But there is yet me,” he thought.

You saw it in the office boy’s smile, the closing doors; you heard a ship blowing in your brain.

He drew the collar of the jacket higher about his neck; the lower part of his face was almost invisible.

“Blast them.”

The hovering policeman watched, and then came up.

“You are not ill?”

“*I am not ill*,” brusquely.

“And you are not civil either.”

“Shall I go?”

“Go.”

“I will remain.” Marius tried to laugh.

“You will get along,” the policeman said, pushing him.

Marius, not resisting, went staggering forwards.

“And you need a wash perhaps,” the policeman called after him.

“Of course,” thought Marius, “I might have shaved, perhaps I forgot. No matter, I must get away, I will perhaps draw a crowd.”

He dragged himself off, turned a street corner sharply; this road was not so crowded, and the noise of winches came louder to his ears. Somewhere there was an end, somewhere there must be a stop.

“They will be sitting there like stones,” he thought as he moved on.

He saw before him the forests of masts, the funnels, the cranes and the winches were roaring, eating up cargo like lions. He saw all this and it was his country, the edge of the sea.

“Tonight I will go to Madame Lustigne’s and I will forget myself. And then I will go home and the house will be silent, as graves are, and they sleeping or waiting or watching, the latter most likely, they are always watching me.”

Suddenly he stopped dead, staring round. Then he crossed the road, sat down, his back against the wall of an old shed, shaded from the sun, he watched the *Clarte* load.

“Lucky Manos,” he said, “lucky man.”

The *Clarte* clouded over, the winches stopped, there was dead silence, he could see nothing but a high building, a towering wall. He was at Nantes. He was mounting stairs, he was at the desk.

“My name is Marius. Captain Eugene Marius...”

And the man said, “You’re not the only one who knows that,” and laughed, and Marius went out, and the laughter followed him down the stairs; he could feel it driving into his back like knives.

He was in Bordeaux, the Rue du Soleil; no eye could escape the brass model of the ship, high and shining in the summer sun. The Bilter Line.

“My name is Marius, Captain Eugene Marius...”

“Sorry...”

“And here I am,” he thought, stiffening where he sat.

A ship’s siren had blown, it struck him like a cry, he sat up sharply, a boat was coming in, he could see her, the sun streaming her decks, the smoke triumphant from her funnel, a voyage ended, she was coming home.

Marius got up and walked nearer to the quay. Already he could see the short stocky figure leaning against her poop rail, and knew it was lucky Manos.

“Never lost a ship, never lost anything in his life, not even a button off his coat, the lucky swine.” He cried within himself, “You self-pitying bastard.”

Twenty yards from where the *Carte* lay he stopped, sat down on a bollard.

“If I could sail in her, as I was, as I used to be, at my full height, if they were not silent, all the days silent, if it had never happened.”

He could see the cargo pouring down into her after hold, saw the others battened down and secure; she would soon be gone.

“In the end I will swim out of it.”

He fell asleep. Later he woke, a hand on his arm, he felt chill, the sun was going, a voice said, “You ought to get home,” and he got up and he went away, never once looked back, and the policeman following with his eye thought, “This place is full of bums,” and watched the tall thin figure vanish round the corner.

Marius took the back streets, and here, unlike the avenue, people were not so important, the tempo was different, the very climate breathed an air of acceptance, of resignation. People passed him by and hardly gave him a glance. There was a moment in the long day when Marius’s spirit lightened; he thought of his room, the climb upstairs, past the silent women, the door closing, the door locked behind him. Alone. Everything in it had become intensely personal to him. He saw everything clearly. The black bed in the corner, the plain scrubbed wooden chair alongside, some flowers in a vase, always fresh; he could never understand who put them there, but he was touched by this. The bundle of charts lying on the mantelpiece, wrapped like mysteries in their brown paper, the sextant on the table under the window, the telescope, a collection of brass buttons, a pipe, a hard plug of tobacco. Always he would look at the picture of the *Mercury*, his first ship, the proud moment. The picture of his father, resplendent in uniform, his boyhood hero. He had loved his father.

He stopped by a bistro, he searched in his pocket, counted two hundred francs, he went inside, but was out again in two minutes, his throat fiery from the brandy.

“Tomorrow will be tomorrow,” he thought, “and they will still be there,” thinking of them – his mother, his sister, sitting so silently in the window, looking out, always looking out, at what, the sea? At everything, and perhaps nothing.

“If I could get away. And the sooner the better. That Philippe, blast him, he could have given me a berth on the *Clarte* as easy as winking, but no, he is so bloody upright and moral and horribly good, and Follet’s no better. When you are down you are down, and there’s the end of it.”

He removed his cap which he crushed into his pocket, he ruffled his hair, wiped his forehead, suddenly dived into an alley. Cooler here, but the smells rose as high as heaven. He was not far from home.

“They hate it, and yet she will follow me, as though I had not anchors enough around my neck. I’ll stow away. Now if I could get to Greece. Ah, that’s the place. Ships there are owned by the Devil, and he mans them too. Well...”

There was the house. He stood for a moment by the door, looked right and left, then went inside.

The whispers sounded to him like prayers, but the moment he had pushed open the door they ceased; they had seen him come, and there was silence again, and they were so still they might have been seated thus for a hundred years. Neither of the women looked at him when he came in.

They were sat side by side in the window as they always were. Often the evening hours were spent in this way; it was an elected silence. They would look out to the broad sea, and the restless breakers. Their very pose, locked in this silence, gave them the appearance of conspirators, eternal watchers, an alertness against the world.

For a moment Marius looked at them, then removed his coat which he hung upon a hook inside the door. He went into the kitchen and brought back bread, wine and an onion. He sat down and began to eat. They could hear the grind of the onion in his teeth. A hungry man. A miserable man.

The young woman rose from her chair and went out. Marius heard her climbing the stairs, and later her slow, almost ponderous movements to and fro in the bedroom. A person uncertain of something, a person tired of waiting, a person always listening.

The old woman, seated in her high-backed wooden chair, had turned round, but not to speak, only to stare. And he did not speak to her, and he did not look her way, but calmly went on eating, making coarse noises as he did so.

She was aged, pinned to the chair by weight of years, by the horrible silence. He could feel her eye upon him, as a pressure; it upset him.

The fierce light of the sun was all about them; the glass of wine caught in it seemed shimmering, forever moving, and as though Marius had sensed this he put his hand, flat upon the glass top and pressed. Watching her, he saw the day’s end, her repose. The labours of it slept peacefully under her bones.

As he looked at her he saw how quickly she averted her glance, as if only now she had realized she had been staring at her son.

This house is of four rooms only, its walls a shattering white in the evening sun. As Marius ate he looked about him – it broke the stare, lightened the silence. Around them the simple furniture, but here and there an object that sharpened his memory. He looked at everything, sipped at his wine. The bones of home, of their life, of what it had been. For a few moments it served to screen off a certain blackness in Marius's mind. He heard the slow, tumbril-like tick of the old clock. Above it on the mantelpiece yet another picture of a naval man. A handsome man, his own father, whose first fruit came out of the sea.

“I, too, was born in the sea,” he thought.

Looking at the picture he was conscious of a certain secret pride, then suddenly his mother, too, was there; she had climbed into the frame beside her husband, and she was young then, and innocent and charming, nothing in the severe black of her dress could hide it; she beside his father, the bright captain.

Now he was looking at his mother again, thinking of her long life, her honourable life, it was impossible not to look at the statue-like figure.

Though she now returned his gaze there was nothing in it save a vast, stony indifference.

Marius leant back in his chair and lit a cigarette, sent smoke clouds madly climbing. He could still hear the restless to and fro movement from the bedroom above; a human pendulum, ticking out a kind of time that was not his time and never could be.

“I shall go out,” thought Marius.

And he went out, leaving the old woman staring at the remains of his meal. He climbed the stairs to his room, and met his sister coming down. As he passed her he was aware of her quick movement away from him, she cringed against the wall.

“I am what I am,” he thought.

When she heard his door close, she steadied herself, then went down.

She cleared away the things from the table, then laid upon it a large dark-green cloth. She resumed her seat by the window with her mother.

“He is back again.”

“So I see.”

The old woman's mouth was as drawn and tight as a shut purse; she said quickly, "And I'll bet he has been cringing to the Heros again. Imagine it! A gang of ruffians calling themselves shipowners."

"But nothing happened?"

The old woman laughed. "He may yet drown in the sea," she said.

"Listen to him," Madeleine said.

"Aren't I always listening? He's back again in his cage. He'll be happy when he finds somebody as miserable as himself. I wish he would go. That is a hard thing to say of a son, but I say it, and every time I see him I think of how he saved himself. Your father could not have done that."

"Please, Mother."

"All right, I will say no more."

"I am glad of that," said Madeleine; she took her mother's large, fleshy hand and placed it on her knee, and stroked it, and smiled warmly to her.

"Is Father Nollet coming this evening?"

"Father Nollet is coming, you seem to doubt," Madame Marius said.

"I am not."

"And I am glad you are not. Do you know I begin to feel the gutter climbing into my bones, think of it. Your father, God have mercy on him, would have cried from shame. Your brother slinking about, crawling for a ship, hands and knees to the job, no dignity, no pride, nothing. Think of that. A Marius. In and out of shipping offices. It is not so much that he lost a ship – many ships have been lost – no, it is something else about him, like a whine in the Marius flesh, I don't understand it. He belongs to the gutter. It is very strange."

She put her hands on her daughter's shoulders, looked earnestly at her.

"Mighty Jesus! That it should have happened to us."

"But it has happened," Madeleine said, "it has happened, it has..."

Madame Marius could already feel the tension rising in her daughter; she pressed downwards with her terrible strength, pressed hard on the shoulders.

"Enough," she said, "enough."

"This is not our home," Madeleine said.

"I am well aware of that. He is yet the son of his mother."

"If I were not here, I wonder if you would embrace him."

The old woman raised her hand and struck her daughter across the mouth.

“The last time I struck at Marius flesh was that time your brother uttered a filthy remark about his uncle, and I did it because it saved your father’s hand. Your father at least was French, and lies in an ocean that will never drag down his son’s bones.”

“I’m sorry, Mother.”

“And you have the right to be sorry.” She looked at the clock. “I will go up,” she said.

“The house where no one speaks is hateful,” Madame Marius said; she rose heavily from her chair, and suddenly her daughter’s hand was behind her.

“Come.”

Madame Marius pushed away the hand. They slowly left the room.

At the stairfoot Madeleine paused, listening. But there was not a sound from her brother’s room. She often thought about him, hours behind the closed door, what did he do? Did he perhaps just sit there and think? And of what?

She allowed the old woman to precede her, and as she watched the slow, tortuous climb she seemed to feel age crying aloud to her. She put her hand behind her mother’s back.

“Don’t do that,” her mother said. “Ah, it will be nice to be cooler.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps Father Nollet will not come after all, it is gone seven.”

“But if he does?”

“Well, naturally he will come up to my room,” the old woman had turned and was looking at her daughter, “or is it perhaps that you are glad he is not?”

She turned and went on, the daughter following.

“How long have we been here?”

“Four months.”

“It seems four years. Often I think of my lovely house at Nantes and I weep for it.”

“You did not have to follow him here,” Madeleine said. “Don’t speak to me, I’m too tired to listen...” and after a momentary silence, “I shall go on myself, I am not that helpless, leave me.”

Madeleine stood still. The aged bones dragged upwards. “But I had better follow,” she thought.

She helped to undress her mother, put her to bed, crossed to the window, shut out the sun, then went away and left her. As she stood on the landing she heard her brother moving in his room.

“He is going out as usual,” she thought. “It is always the same, out all day, out all night, it’s a wearing out, that’s what it is, a wearing out.”

Behind the door Marius’s hand was upon the latch. He had heard the voices, the tread upon the stairs, they had gone up.

“Now if I were to hear a sudden knock, then I would go down, and at the front door I would find one from the Heros office.

“Manos fell down the hatch this evening and was killed. They are looking for a skipper.

“Perhaps,” thought Marius, “I am truly finished.”

He lifted the latch, then dropped it; he had heard the feet moving downstairs.

“Soon she, too, will go to bed.”

Madeleine returned to the small sitting room, took her chair by the window and sat down. Looking out she realized that everything tired her: the sight of the sea, the yet merciless sun, the hard light, the restless tormenting breakers, the ships, that, from this window looked so much like toys. She sat stiff, tense, and remained so for some time. Later she heard Marius go out. She saw his tall figure pass the window.

“Poor Eugene, I am yet sorry for him, and yet I hate him.”

She laid her hands flat upon the table and looked at them.

“I am not like the others,” she told herself, “I never was. But I know what I am.”

Rising from the chair she crossed to the mirror on the wall and stared into it. She pointed a finger at the reflection and said slowly, “This is you. I wonder which one of us will wear out the other.”

She walked about the room, undecided, aimless; she looked at the clock again and again. No, it was too late for the priest now, something must have kept him back.

“And when he comes I will say yes, because it is best for both of us,” her mind leaping back days, to a simpler time, a happier time. “There was never any other place but Nantes.

“I am tired too, I am even tired of being tired, perhaps I will go to bed also. Yet it is so early. Still...”

She shut the door silently behind her.

“I am closest to her, we are closest to each other. It will be like that until the end. He will always look another way, he is not of us.”

She found her mother lying awake, staring at the low ceiling. She crossed to the bed, knelt, she said her prayers aloud. Then she undressed and climbed in beside her. She put an arm round the old woman.

Madame Marius felt the head heavy upon her breast, felt the body heave, listened to the sobs. She neither spoke nor moved. This was not new, this lying together, clutched and clutching, this silence and this weeping, it was a year of age. After a while she spoke.

“He has gone?”

The daughter’s head moved a little, this meant yes.

Later, as the light began to fall, they fell asleep, bound to each other, easily, casually, as children do.

2

“THERE IS SOMETHING I have to do today, yet I cannot for the life of me think what it is,” and Monsieur Follet went round and round in his swivel chair, head high, thinking hard. It was a certain method of reviving the memory. Suddenly he stopped, “Ah, of course. That rise for Labiche.”

“Labiche,” called Follet. “Labiche.”

He might have been calling his dog. Nevertheless it was a man who came – four foot six in height, large-headed, extraordinarily broad in the shoulder. A dwarf-like creature in the fifties. Aristide Labiche was of curious shape. At the Heros he was referred to as the “pregnant man”, and sometimes “the little bull”. His bulbous nose was a standing joke amongst the staff. He had a heavy, sensual chin. Monsieur Follet had some regard for him. He worked hard, he was loyal, it was rare to discover that Labiche was *not* at his high desk, his head lost in a mass of documents. He liked Labiche’s eyes, which were large and of a soft brown; he thought they looked exactly like those of his retriever, and sometimes that they should have lain in a woman’s head.

“Ah Labiche! Please sit down.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What are you working on at present?”

“The *Orlando*’s time sheets, sir.”

He glanced up questioningly at the other; it was not often that he was asked to come into the director's office.

"Of course, that overhauling job, yes. Healthy, Labiche, or unhealthy?"

Labiche only smiled, giving Follet a wonderful view of his single gold tooth. There were the inevitable jokes – Labiche expected them, they came.

"Still working hard for the salvation of France?" he asked, his fingers tapping on the blotting pad.

Follet's slow, somewhat greasy smile was not returned.

"Have I any important appointments today, Labiche? You have such an excellent memory."

"Manos at three o'clock, sir," replied the other.

"That brings me to the point," said Follet. "It links up at once with an efficiency, a loyalty that I wish to reward. As from Friday, Labiche, your salary goes up by one hundred francs a month."

Labiche got out of his chair, stood erect, looked at the director.

"I am grateful, sir," he said.

Follet was struck by the dignified, though somewhat ridiculous pose.

"That's all right," he said. "But do not give it all away, Labiche, you are a far too generous man..."

"No, sir."

"There was an altercation outside my office, Labiche," said Follet. "You are in the next office to Philippe, you can see everything that happens."

"It was that captain again; they say he's a captain, looking for a berth. He is always asking for you, Monsieur Follet."

"So I gather."

Follet stuck his thumbs into his vest and sighed, his voice sounded tired.

"Sometimes, Labiche, I'm sick of the very sight of sailors, that's why I've delegated Philippe to do all the interviewing, given him the requisite authority. This city, it stinks with them. But you, living where you do, there's no need for me to enlarge on it," and he saw the little clerk smile. "Yes, far too many, and not enough ships, Labiche. Come to think of it, it's cruel. What we owners lost in tonnage in two wars, is nobody's business, I suppose. Consider Heros. We've seventeen ships

and once we had something like seventy, think of it, and every berth occupied, packed tight, securely locked, not another berth, not a single one, and a waiting list today of over two hundred.

“An odd thing, Labiche. I’m struck by the number of men seeking to get to the Orient; something starting there perhaps, but my broker is silent.” He gave the clerk a quick pat on the back, it made the dust fly.

He got up, “This rise, Labiche, it is purely between ourselves.”

Labiche stared. It gave the episode a conspiratorial air, yet to him nothing seemed more simple, one more clerk getting a rise in salary.

He was moving towards the door, Follet following, who now picked up his hat and gave Labiche a final instruction.

“Tell Marcelle that Manos will be at my office at three o’clock prompt, and that he’s to make the usual arrangements.”

“Very good, sir,” and Labiche went out.

Follet called after him, “Tell Philippe I’m ready, it’s a quarter to one.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If Labiche ever dies,” he thought, “the Saint Vincent de Paul Society will collapse – little Labiche is the rock that holds it up.”

Philippe came in.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” Philippe replied.

They both went out.

Labiche, after this unexpected call to Follet’s office, and his more unexpected rise in the estimation of the Heros concern, had returned to his own cubicle, sat down at his desk. He was soon buried deeply in the *Orlando’s* affairs. He was a very careful man, conscientious, scrupulous. He not only dotted down the last minute and the last sou for the ultimate benefit of the Heros Company, but would often, in imagination, go aboard the ship upon whose time sheets he happened to be working. He was generally escorted to the best cabin, then sailed away in her, the Captain’s special guest for the remainder of the voyage.

In the twelve years in which he had worked in the red-brick building behind the Rue Lens, he had sailed many voyages, travelled to many countries. He had, indeed, been round the world six times. This apart, he had never at any time travelled further than the Place de Lenche or the Cannabiere except on a single occasion when he had gone to Lyons

with a party of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, of which he was the local secretary.

And every evening, promptly at five o'clock, he ran down the iron stairs and out of the building, to mount his bright-green and redoubtable bicycle, on which he pedalled furiously until he reached the bottom of the hill. Thenceforth he climbed, laboriously, up and up, what Monsieur Follet had once described as climbing into hell. And it was somewhere on its second floor that Aristide Labiche lived with his wife and two children.

Heros liked Labiche – he was so faithful, punctual; he gave a good day's work for what might not be a good day's pay. Monsieur Follet had not forgotten that this year he had promised him a rise. Now, Labiche toiled away with the time sheets, all the time enjoying a feeling of happiness, like a long, secret, unending smile, that shone inwards like the sun.

That their best clerk was able to split himself into two persons was a matter upon which the Heros concern was entirely indifferent. So long as the clerical side functioned well, all was well. What Labiche did after five o'clock was his own business. The Heros would never interfere. All knew how his spare time was spent; they admired him in a distant, cynical sort of way, but they never commented upon it.

Philippe, a home-loving person if ever there was one, could never understand why Labiche's wife put up with it all, for the man was hardly home from his work and enjoying his supper, than his mind was made up to be out again. Madame Labiche was totally resigned to his mission, and the green hat and the umbrella, the parting smile as he reached the door was only a signal to her that another creature had fallen.

Labiche loved creatures. A man of serious purpose, with a mission in life, a clerk who sat in the dingiest of the Heros offices, but who in the evening wandered off into the dark places. One was not a member of the Saint Vincent de Paul for nothing.

There were creatures who spent more than forty days and forty nights in the desert, and Labiche was after them. There was always somebody on the rack. His brain contained a large, outspread map of hell, full of wandering creatures who could be saved. His was a continuous descending movement. He was familiar with abysses, dark corners, lost holes, concealed turnings, labyrinths. He visited the sick,

prisons, hospitals, hostels for the dying, warehouses; he climbed the gangways of ships, found his way into malodorous forecastles, then came down again, going on, scattering good intentions, scattering seed as he went. His country lay behind the locked door, the closed window; he travelled in the night as though on wings. He watched out for the bent, the stooping, the blunderers, the night leaners against walls, the lost, flat on their backs in the knocking shops. He arrived after the last word had been said, after the clock had stopped, he was the extension on Hope. Dereliction drew him as powerfully as light; he believed in redemption, the resurrection of souls.

There were depths lower than abyss, and he knew them: miseries as solid as walls, sin as affrighting and fierce as flame. Labiche never paused, but went forwards, hope had the solidity of rock. Mercy was not just some blind leap of the heart.

But after the nightmare hours there was the morning, the quieter day, the ordinary, the normal hours, yet Labiche often drew after him a kind of hallucinatory thread, and sometimes the very ordinary objects in his office took on an unreality...

"There!" he said, having finished the last of the *Orlando's* sheets, "there," and he made them into a neat pile and put them away in the top drawer of his desk, which he locked. He pushed in his chair, went and looked through the window, to see the sky and a desert of roofings. He put on his hat, picked up the umbrella, and went out into the corridor. He tore down the iron stairway; he always took it at a run, as though never a minute must be wasted. He met the cleaner coming up, armed with his cloths, his brush and pail.

"Good day."

"Good day," the cleaner said, turning to watch him go. Nothing seemed funnier to the cleaner than the sight of Labiche's odd shape careering madly down the stairs.

"Poor sod. Quite mad, I'm sure."

Labiche went off to Fred's. Meanwhile Follet and Philippe had reached Madame Gaston's establishment. They never lunched anywhere else.

Monsieur Follet was a fat man; he never sat comfortably anywhere. Today he draped one of Madame Gaston's chairs, enjoying his lunch with M. Philippe. He toyed with a cutlet, and at the same time kept his eye on Madame, seated at her high desk, whose present function was one of dispensing smiles, as one after another of her favourite

customers came in. Follet was always attracted to Madame Gaston by her wonderful red hair; he sometimes expected it to burst into flame. A glance from her to M. Philippe made him realize what a reedy instrument his assistant really was.

“You were saying?” said Follet.

Philippe sat back in his chair. “I said that Nantes bum was in again yesterday, sir.”

“Indeed! I was unaware of it,” replied Follet; he looked quickly round the room as though an eavesdropper lay in every corner.

“By the way, that Toulon agent says that the stuff is on the way, and a long way, too, I think. If I did not think it paved the way for future business I would never dream of accepting it, but agents are mighty people as you well know, Philippe, and one must not offend them. But the *Clarte* is held up, and her hatch yawning open for the stuff. And Manos is irritable; I cannot offend my best skipper, although he is at the nodding age. He desires to be under way by seven o’clock. I am seeing him at three o’clock. You might get on to Marcelle as soon as you get back – we *must* know when this bloody consignment is arriving.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What did you say to this Nantes bum?”

“Nothing, sir. What does one say? If one’s a parrot perhaps the same as one said yesterday. There are no vacancies, and indeed we of the Heros like to keep the concern a family affair, we do not like strangers...”

Follet smiled. “Quite so. What sort of job, Philippe.”

“Commander.”

“Nothing less than that?” Follet roared. “Indeed, with his record.”

“With his record, sir,” Philippe replied, wiping his hands carefully on his napkin.

“I’ve never seen him. What’s he like. I’ve heard of him, of course, and indeed I may say that I’ve the strongest feelings I’ve met people of that name, years ago of course.”

“I never looked, sir,” Philippe said.

“And he standing in front of you?”

“What could happen if I’d looked at him? A miracle? There are no berths, our ships are manned. Isn’t that correct, sir?”

“Why yes, of course, of course. And there are other lines,” said Follet.

"Then let him try them," said Philippe.

"Quite so."

Follet began wiping his mouth; he looked towards the high desk, smiled, received one back; the cheese was coming.

"He asked for you, sir," Philippe said, "but he always does."

"Naturally. Everybody asks for me, Philippe. But one is far too busy. It's a long way to come looking for a ship, anyhow, a long way..."

"If one comes to Marseilles looking for a ship the circumstances may be exceptional, sir," said Philippe.

"That is very true. I gather his people are here, too. Am I correct?"

"They say his mother and sister followed him here."

"Intriguing, but far too hot today to pursue anything."

"The family is quite respectable – I understand that the father was a Commander in the Navy, went down with the *Croilus* in the First World War..."

"That's it. I remember now, I met a Madame Marius and her husband years ago, at a launching, so long ago I've almost forgotten it."

"I wonder he did not follow in the father's footsteps, sir," Philippe said.

"Well, as to that, I could tell you that his own father had the Admiralty turn the son down; the father didn't think he was good enough for the Navy, not French enough if I may say so; a stuffy, thick-headed provincial but a thorough good fellow, and loyal, that counts; there's little loyalty about today, Philippe," and Philippe nodded an immediate approval.

"He'd a suspension some years ago, too."

"Yes. A heavy loss for her owners, a very young captain, twenty-five or six, no more, at the time."

"A heavy loss to her owners?"

"It was indeed. Marius did well in the Marine, but somehow he always steered clear of decent owners, the riff-raff attracted; I've heard tales about him, seeing sailors every day of one's life..."

"Yes yes, of course. His stock fell."

"Then you have this other affair, the *Corsican*. There was supposed to have been an inquiry about it..."

"It didn't happen, hardly the time, people were too busy killing each other... the war."

"That's true."