

The Erasers

Prologue

1

IN THE DIMNESS OF THE CAFÉ, the manager is arranging the tables and chairs, the ashtrays, the siphons of soda water; it is six in the morning.

He has no need to see distinctly, he does not even know what he is doing. He is still asleep. Very ancient laws rule every detail of his gestures, saved for once from the uncertainty of human intentions; each second marks a pure movement: a sidestep, the chair thirty centimetres out from the table, three wipes of the rag, half-turn to the right, two steps forwards, each second marks, perfect, even, unblurred. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. Thirty-four. Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Thirty-seven. Each second in its exact place.

Unfortunately time will soon no longer be master. Wrapped in their aura of doubt and error, this day's events, however insignificant they may be, will in a few seconds begin their task, gradually encroaching upon their ideal order, cunningly introducing an occasional inversion, a discrepancy, a confusion, a warp, in order to accomplish their work: a day in early winter without plan, without direction, incomprehensible and monstrous.

But it is still too early, the street door has just been unbolted, the only person on the scene has not yet recovered his own existence. It is the moment when the dozen chairs gently come down from the imitation marble tables where they have spent the night. Nothing else. An automaton's arm puts the setting back in place.

When everything is ready, the light goes on...

A fat man is standing here, the manager, trying to get his bearings among the tables and chairs. Over the bar, the long mirror where a sick image floats, the manager, greenish, his features blurred, liverish and fleshy in his aquarium.

On the other side, behind the mirror, the manager again who dissolves slowly in the dawning light from the street. It is no doubt this silhouette that has just put the café in order; now it need only disappear. In the mirror flickers the reflection of this ghost, already almost completely

decomposed, and beyond, increasingly undecided, the wavering rigmarole of shadows: the manager, the manager, the manager... The manager, a mournful nebula, drowned in his halo.

Painfully the manager emerges. Again he fishes up some random snatches that are still floating around him. No need to hurry, there's not much current at this hour.

He leans on both arms against the table, body tilted forwards, not wide awake, his eyes staring at something: that fool Antoine with his Swedish calisthenics every morning. And his pink tie the other day, yesterday. Today is Tuesday: Jeannette's coming later.

Funny little spot; this marble's no good, everything stains it. It looks like blood. Daniel Dupont last night – a stone's throw from here. Funny business: a burglar would never have gone into a lit room on purpose, the man must have wanted to kill him. Revenge, or what? Clumsy in any case. That was yesterday. Look for it in the morning paper. Oh yes, Jeannette's coming later. And have her buy... No, tomorrow.

An absent-minded wipe of the rag, as an excuse, over the funny spot. One way or another vague masses pass, out of reach; or else they're just holes.

Jeannette will have to light the stove right away; it's getting cold early this year. The chemist says it always does if it rained on 14th July; maybe he's right. Of course that other fool, Antoine, who's always right, just had to prove the opposite. And the chemist was beginning to get upset, four or five glasses of white wine are enough for him; but Antoine doesn't see anything. Fortunately the manager was there. It was yesterday. Or Sunday? It was Sunday; Antoine had his hat; it makes him look sharp, that hat. His hat and his pink tie! No, wait, he had his tie on yesterday too. No. Besides, what difference can it make?

A peevish wipe of the rag once again removes yesterday's dust from the tabletop. The manager straightens up.

Against the glass he notices the reverse of the "Furnished Rooms" sign, from which two letters have been missing for seventeen years; for seventeen years he has been intending to put them back. It was already like that in Pauline's time; they had said when they first came...

Besides, there is only one room to rent, so in any case it's ridiculous. A glance at the clock. Six thirty. Time to wake the man up.

"Get to work, lazybones!"

This time he has almost spoken aloud, with a grimace of disgust on his lips. The manager is not in a good mood; he has not had enough sleep.

To tell the truth, he is not often in a good mood.

On the first floor, at the end of a hallway, the manager knocks, waits a few seconds and, since he hears no answer, knocks again, several times, a little louder. On the other side of the door an alarm clock goes off. His right hand frozen in its gesture, the manager keeps listening, spitefully waiting to discover the sleeper's reactions.

But no one turns off the alarm. After a minute or so it stops of its own accord with astonishment on a few last abortive sounds.

The manager knocks again: still nothing. He cracks open the door and puts his head inside; in the dim morning light he sees the unmade bed, the room in disorder. He walks in and inspects the premises: nothing suspicious, only the empty bed, a double bed, without a pillow, with a single depression marked in the middle of the bolster, the blankets thrown back towards the foot of the bed; on the dresser, the enamel basin full of dirty water. All right, the man has already left – it's his business after all. He went out without going through the café, he knew there wouldn't be any fresh coffee yet and after all he didn't have to say anything. The manager leaves with a shrug; he does not like people who get up ahead of time.

Downstairs, he finds somebody waiting, an ordinary-looking man, a little shabby, not a regular customer. The manager goes behind his bar, turns on an extra lamp and stares at the customer rudely, ready to spit in his face that it's too early for coffee. But the man merely asks:

"Monsieur Wallas, please?"

"He's gone," the manager says, scoring a point all the same.

"When did he leave?" the man asks, rather surprised.

"This morning."

"What time this morning?"

An anxious glance at his watch, then at the clock.

"I haven't any idea," the manager says.

"You didn't see him leave?"

"If I had seen him leave, I'd know when it was."

A pitying pout emphasizes this easy success. The other man thinks for a few seconds and then says:

“Then you don’t know when he’ll be coming back either?”

The manager does not even answer. He attacks on new grounds:

“What can I serve you?”

“Coffee – black,” the man says.

“No coffee this early,” the manager says.

Definitely a good victim, a sad little spider’s face, perpetually reconstituting the tatters of his frayed intelligence. Besides, how could he know that this Wallas came last night to this obscure bar in the Rue des Arpenteurs? It’s unnatural.

Having played all his cards for the moment, the manager is no longer interested in his visitor. He dries his bottles with an absent-minded expression and, since the other man is not drinking anything, he turns off the two lamps, one after the other. There’s plenty of daylight now.

The man has gone, mumbling something incomprehensible. The manager finds himself back among his wreckage, the spots on the marble, the varnish of the chairs which the dirt makes sticky in places, the mutilated sign on the glass. But he is the victim of more insistent spectres, spots darker than those of the wine disturb his vision. He tries to brush them away, but it is no use: at every step he bumps into another... The movement of an arm, the music of idle words, Pauline, sweet Pauline.

Sweet Pauline, who died so strangely, so long ago. Strangely? The manager leans towards the mirror. What’s so strange about it? A spiteful contraction gradually distorts his face. Isn’t death always strange? The grimace grows worse, freezes in a gargoyle mask that stares at itself for a moment more. Then an eye closes, the mouth twists, one side of the face contracts, a still more hideous monster appears and dissolves immediately too, giving way to a calm and almost smiling image. Pauline’s eyes.

Strange? Isn’t it the most natural thing of all? Take this Dupont, how much stranger it is that he is not dead. The manager begins laughing softly, a kind of voiceless laughter without gaiety, like a sleepwalker’s laugh. Around him the familiar spectres imitate him; each has its own grin. They even strain a point somewhat, guffaw, nudging one another with their elbows and slapping one another on the back. How can he

make them shut up now? There are a lot of them. And they are quite at home.

Motionless in front of the mirror, the manager watches himself laughing; he tries as hard as he can not to see the others that are swarming across the room, the jubilant troupe, the wild legion of minor heartaches, the refuse of fifty years of badly digested existence. Their racket has become intolerable, the horrible concert of brays and yelps, and straight away, in the silence that has suddenly fallen again, a young woman’s clear laugh.

“Go to hell!”

The manager has turned round, wrenched from the nightmare by his own cry. No one is there, of course, neither Pauline nor the others. He glances with weary eyes around the room that calmly awaits the people who will come, the chairs where the murderers and their victims will sit, the tables where the communion will be served to them.

Here is Antoine; it’s starting well.

“Have you heard the news yet?”

Not even a nod in answer. He is not an easy customer this morning, the manager. Let’s give him a try, anyway.

“A man named Albert Dupont, murdered last night, here, right at the end of the street!”

“Daniel.”

“Daniel what?”

“Daniel Dupont.”

“No, I said it was Albert. Right here—”

“First of all, no one was murdered.”

“That’s what you say. How do you know anyway, without ever leaving your bar?”

“She telephoned from here. The old housekeeper who works for them. Their line was out of order. Flesh wound in the arm.”

(Poor fool who always knows everything.)

“Well, he’s dead anyway! Look at the paper: he’s dead, I tell you.”

“You have a paper?”

Antoine looks through his overcoat pockets, then he remembers:

“No, I left it for my wife.”

“All right, never mind, it doesn’t matter anyway: his name’s Daniel and he isn’t dead at all.”

Antoine does not look happy. He stands there wondering what he might do that would be more convincing than an ironic sneer, but the bartender does not give him time.

“Are you drinking something, or getting the hell out?”

The dispute is likely to grow nastier, when the door opens again and lets in a cheerful, plump, and gesticulating person, almost in rags.

“Good morning, boys. Say, I have a riddle for you.”

“All right, we know that one,” Antoine says.

“No, boy,” the cheerful man says, undiscouraged, “you don’t know this one. No one does. No one, you hear? Bartender, a glass of white wine!”

Judging from the man’s face, his riddle must be a really good one. So no one will miss a word of it, he enunciates it as if he were giving dictation:

“What is the animal that in the morning...”

But no one is listening to him. He has already had one too many. He’s funny, of course, but the other two don’t have the heart for jokes: what concerns them is a man’s life!

2

THE RUE DES ARPENTEURS is a long straight street, bordered on each side by houses that are already old, whose inadequately tended two- or three-storied façades suggest the modest circumstances of the tenants they shelter: labourers, office workers or merely fishermen. The shops are not very prosperous-looking and even the cafés are few and far between – not that these people are particularly sober, but they choose to do their drinking elsewhere.

The Café des Alliés (Wines & Liquors. Furnished Rooms) is located at the end of the street, number ten, only a few houses from the Boulevard Circulaire and the city proper, so that the proletarian character of the buildings in its vicinity is somewhat tempered by bourgeois features. At the corner of the parkway stands a big stone block of flats, well kept up, and opposite, at number two, a small two-storey private house with a narrow strip of garden around it. The structure does not have much style but gives an impression of comfort, even of a certain luxury; a fence and behind it a spindle-tree hedge clipped to a man’s height complete its isolation.

The Rue des Arpenteurs extends eastwards, interminable and less and less prepossessing, to quite out-of-the-way neighbourhoods that are obviously those of the poor: a chequerboard of muddy paths between the shacks, rusty corrugated iron, old planks and tarpaper.

To the west, on the other side of the parkway and its canal, stretches the city proper, the streets somewhat cramped between the high brick houses, the public buildings without unnecessary ornament, the churches stiff, the shop windows sombre. The whole effect is solid, occasionally substantial, but austere; the cafés close early, the windows are narrow, the people are serious.

Yet this mournful town is not monotonous: a complicated network of canals and ponds brings in from the sea, which is only six kilometres north, the smell of kelp, the gulls and even a few boats of low tonnage, coasters, barges, small tugs, for which a whole series of drawbridges and locks opens. This water, this movement keep people’s minds open. The freighter whistles reach them from the harbour, over the tow docks and depots, and at high tide bring the space, the temptation, the consolation of possibility.

Since their heads are on their shoulders, temptation is enough: possibility remains simply possible, the whistles have long blown without hope.

The crews are recruited elsewhere; men around here prefer to go into business, on land, the most daring among them scarcely venturing further than thirty miles from the coast to the herring fisheries. The rest are content to listen to the ships and estimate their tonnage. They do not even go to see them, it’s too far. The Sunday walk stops at the Boulevard Circulaire: one comes out into the parkway along the Avenue Christian-Charles, then follows it along the canal to the New Dairy or to the Gutenberg Bridge, rarely below.

Further south, on Sundays, one meets, so to speak, only neighbourhood people. On weekdays, the calm here is disturbed only by the army of bicycles on their way to work.

At seven in the morning, the workers have already gone past; the parkway is virtually deserted.

At the edge of the canal, near the drawbridge at the end of the Rue des Arpenteurs, there are two men. The bridge has just opened to let a trawler through; standing near the winch, a sailor is about to close it again.