

*Journey to the End  
of the Night*

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

Translated by Ralph Manheim

Preface by André Derval



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## *Preface*

### The Heart of My Sensibility

In 1949, in exile in Denmark, Céline wrote in a preface to the first post-Second World War edition of *Journey to the End of the Night*: “It’s for *Journey* that they’re after me! Under the axe I’ll bellow it! Between ‘them’ and me it’s to the finish! To the guts! Too foul to talk about... pissed with Mystique! What a business! (...) The world of intentions amuses me... used to amuse me... not any more.

“If I weren’t under such pressure, such duress, I’d suppress the whole lot... especially *Journey*... Of all my books it’s the only really vicious one... That’s right... The heart of my sensibility...” Perfectly aware that his reputation as an anti-Semitic writer is well established, Céline weighs the degree of provocation in his sentences. *Journey to the End of the Night* was an enormous commercial success in the early 1930s, widely acclaimed by critics, despite or because of its excesses. A novel which shook up political, social and literary convention, it was in fact co-opted by the left-wing intelligentsia, the very same one which condemned it after the publication of his political writings from 1936 onwards: *Mea culpa*, an anti-communist pamphlet written when he returned from the USSR, followed by texts openly in line with racist, far-right ideology, even pro-Hitlerian: *Trifles for a Massacre* (1937), *The School for Corpses* (1938) and *A Fine Mess* (1941). However, the 1949 preface is not only designed to play with paradox, to divert attention and opprobrium, in a grotesque manner, towards the work which brought him so much recognition and notoriety: there is undoubtedly genuine sincerity on the part of the author when he declares that they’ve been after him ever since *Journey*. And it is to this, to the novel’s inveterate tendency to provoke countless scandals of varying degrees, that Céline is alluding.

A monumental fresco of the errings of the capitalist West at the start of the twentieth century, *Journey to the End of the Night* begins with the mass slaughter of the First World War, horrifying and absurd. This first part of the book, in which the libertarian inspiration is

obvious, describes the various attempts of individuals, be they the “hero” Bardamu or his “negative double” Robinson, to escape from the mechanisms of destruction which have been triggered to destroy them. A continuation of *Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse and fitting in with the pacifist novels of the period, *Journey* goes beyond them in the implacable way it denounces war, the system that produces it and the psychologies which have made it possible and which it has inspired, paternalist or feminine, by the revelation of the underlying death instinct (a notion found in readings of Freud). Surrounded by horror, as much intellectual and moral as physical, the refractory individual has no way out apart from voluntary mutilation, execution for desertion or simulation, or insanity.

Second stage of the *Journey*, after a terrifying sea passage: Africa and colonial exploitation, which the narrator describes without concession, without compassion, although this section contains one of the rare passages that was dismissed as sentimental by the less agreeable critics: Alcide’s account of the education of his niece in metropolitan France. Following that of the soldiers bogged down in senseless massacres, the description of the miserable condition of the natives, prey to the absurd inhumanity of the system, calls, by its very contiguity, for a general reflection on a world submitted to the laws of commerce and the arbitrary, a world resembling a universal prison. The conclusion of Bardamu’s odyssey: the discovery of America, the model of a radiant future, of capitalist industrialization, which completes the grinding down of the individuals’ last remaining strength and illusions. The “other world” having no hope to offer, best to return to “one’s ghosts”, with whom several scores still have to be settled: a career as a doctor to the poor awaits Bardamu, paving the way for some final explorations of the contemporary body and soul, in Paris, the outskirts, the suburbs and the provinces. Between despair and the social fantasy style used by writers such as Pierre Mac Orlan, the actors and settings of the underbelly of the Roaring Twenties march out, in a tragic, grotesque, obscene, sordid and grimy procession: patients, doctors, concierges, prostitutes, hoteliers, pensioners, outcasts and outsiders struggle and converge towards the final tragedy, giving a final touch to the denunciation of the sentimentality in which 1920s France was swimming, like a conjuration in response to the images of the recent worldwide carnage.

It can be easily understood why this book had the effect of a veritable boulder in the pond of convention which sought to cover up the realities

of the experience of millions of men with a veil of modesty, a challenge to the official hypocrisies that were rewriting history to their own advantage. Hence an enormous success with readers, going beyond the usual scope for a literary best-seller to attain a political dimension – a reputedly non-reading public purchased the book and debated its ideas, assisted by the critics, who were not to be outdone by the author's bold declarations. In addition to these printed scandals, one should mention the fact that Céline did not win the Prix Goncourt that year, even though he was virtually guaranteed to do so. Press revelations of the covert details of the affair – the alleged pressure placed on the juries by Hachette, the distributor of the eventual winner's publishing company, Gallimard – even led to court cases and costly fines, which brought one newspaper to bankruptcy.

A first novel by an unknown author, writing under a pseudonym, who turned out to be a doctor from the Parisian suburbs, *Journey to the End of the Night* for a long time brought, with its commercial success, another scandal to bear on Céline: that of having escaped from the rule of the author of a single successful book, that status which some have for a number of years attempted to ascribe to him, with certain critics repeating after each new publication that his oeuvre was unreadable except for *Journey*, etc.

The overlap between the social position of the protagonist of *Journey* and that of Doctor Destouches naturally led to the question of how much autobiography one should read into it: clearly this *Journey* was not entirely *imaginary*, contrary to what was announced in the prefatory disclaimer. Various connections were immediately made with the episodes of the book: Louis Destouches was a First World War veteran, also injured and decorated; he spent time in Africa and the United States. This closeness between the autobiographical material and the fictional treatment was to be maintained and even increased throughout his subsequent works. As early as the second novel *Death on Credit*, the narrator takes care to mention that he is the author of *Journey*, that he practises medicine in the suburbs and that he will recreate the Belle Époque of his childhood in the heart of Paris. The mixed critical reception of *Death on Credit* – the completion of which had demanded considerable effort on Céline's part – was one of the reasons for his growing hostility towards journalists and intellectuals, and he adopted various prejudices common in far-right circles. Having left, according to his own claims, for Soviet Russia to spend his royalties,

he was appalled on his return and published a short text, *Mea culpa*, lambasting the Communist regime, to which he added a revised version of his medical thesis on the tragic life of Semmelweis, who championed the use of antiseptic procedures in the field of obstetrics. The political pamphlets, mentioned above, would soon follow, of which the first, *Trifles for a Massacre*, helped him to find renewed commercial success. Close to collaborationist circles, without ever accepting any official duties or honours, he demonstrated his respect for the hardliners in various open letters to extremist newspapers. Shortly before the Liberation he published a novel set in London in 1916, *Guignol's Band*, on which he had been working since 1940 – it is interesting to note that it contains at least two Jewish characters whose portrayal, racial stereotyping notwithstanding, demonstrates some undeniable sympathy on the part of the narrator. Aware of the dangers surrounding him – members of the Resistance movement having explicitly named him as a traitor – Céline escaped to Germany in June 1944, along with his wife, the dancer Lucette Almanzor, and his cat Bébert, in the hope of reaching Denmark – they were soon joined by their friend the actor Robert Le Vigan, who was compromised by his work for Radio-Paris, which served German propaganda.

From this journey through Nazi Germany under Allied bombing, in places such as Baden-Baden, Berlin and Sigmaringen (to where the Pétain government had withdrawn), Céline would source the material for his final novels. Finding refuge in Denmark, he lived in hiding there for around nine months before being arrested following an extradition request by the French authorities: he would remain in captivity in prison and hospital until June 1947, then in exile until July 1951, when he benefited from an amnesty which applied to veterans with war injuries. On his return to France he published new works of fiction, stipulating his categorical opposition to any reissue of his political writings in his contract with his new publisher. *Fable for Another Time* and *Normance* appeared amid near-universal indifference: only marginal publications, anarchist or far-right, mentioned them. It must be said that Céline did everything to disorientate the reader (and insisted that his publisher generate no publicity for them): his style had been considerably transformed, becoming a complete breakdown of written form, by a narration which made use of a large palette of verbal resources, brutally and continually switching register, lexical field and subject. The latter of which in the second opus is principally



## *Author's Preface to the 1952 Gallimard Edition*

Hey, they're putting *Journey* on the rails again.

What a feeling it gives me.

A lot of things have happened in fourteen years...

If I weren't under so much pressure, forced to earn my living, I can tell you right now, I'd suppress the whole thing, I wouldn't let a single line through.

Everything gets taken the wrong way. I've been the cause of too much evil.

Just think of all the deaths, the hatreds around me... the treachery... the sewer it adds up to... the monsters...

Oh, you've got to be blind and deaf!

You'll say: but it's not *Journey*! It's your crimes that are killing you, *Journey* has nothing to do with it. You yourself have been your ruin! Your *Bagatelles*! Your abominable lingo! Your imaging, clowning villainy! The law's clutching you, strangling you? Hell, what are you complaining about? You jerk!

Oh, many thanks! Many thanks! I'm raging! Fuming! Panting! With hatred! Hypocrites! Jugheads! You can't fool me! It's for *Journey* that they're after me! Under the axe I'll bellow it! Between "them" and me it's to the finish! To the guts! Too foul to talk about... pissed with *Mystique*! What a business!

If I weren't under pressure, forced to earn my living, I'm telling you right now, I'd suppress the whole lot. A homage I paid to jackals!... That's right!... A free gift... A tip... I threw my luck away... in '36... gave it to the executioners' wives! The prosecutors! The undertakers! One two three admirable books to cut my throat with! And listen to my groans! I made them a present! I was charitable, that's all!

The world of intentions amuses me... used to amuse me... not any more.

If I weren't under such pressure, such duress, I'd suppress the whole lot... especially *Journey*... Of all my books it's the only really vicious one... That's right... The heart of my sensibility...

It'll all start over again. The Sarabbath!\* You'll hear a whistling from up above, from far away, from places without names: words, orders...

You'll get an eyeful of their machinations!... You'll come and tell me about it...

Oh, don't imagine that I'm playing! I've stopped playing... I've even stopped being amiable.

If I weren't under duress, as though standing with my back to something... I'd suppress the whole lot.

– Louis-Ferdinand Céline, 1952

*Journey to the End  
of the Night*

*To Elisabeth Craig*

Our life is a journey  
Through winter and night,  
We look for our way  
In a sky without light.

*(Song of the Swiss Guards, 1793)*

*Travel is useful, it exercises the imagination. All the rest is disappointment and fatigue. Our journey is entirely imaginary. That is its strength.*

*It goes from life to death. People, animals, cities, things, all are imagined. It's a novel, just a fictitious narrative. Littré\* says so, and he's never wrong.*

*And besides, in the first place, anyone can do as much. You just have to close your eyes.*

*It's on the other side of life.*

HERE'S HOW IT STARTED. I'd never said a word. Not one word. It was Arthur Ganate\* that made me speak up. Arthur was a friend from med school. So we meet on the Place Clichy. It was after breakfast. He wants to talk to me. I listen. "Not out here!" he says. "Let's go in!" We go in. And there we were. "This terrace," he says, "is for jerks! Come on over there!" Then we see that there's not a soul in the street, because of the heat; no cars, nothing. Same when it's very cold, not a soul in the street; I remember now, it was he who had said one time: "The people in Paris always look busy, when all they actually do is roam around from morning to night; it's obvious, because when the weather isn't right for walking around, when it's too cold or too hot, you don't see them any more; they're all indoors, drinking their *cafés crème* or their beers. And that's the truth! The century of speed, they call it! Where? Great changes, they say! For instance? In truth nothing has changed. They go on admiring themselves, that's all. And that's not new either. Words. Even the words haven't changed much! Two or three little ones, here and there..." Pleased at having proclaimed these useful truths, we sat looking at the ladies in the café.

After a while the conversation turned to President Poincaré,\* who was due to inaugurate a small-dog show that same morning, and that led to *Le Temps*,\* where I'd read about it. Arthur Ganate starts kidding me about *Le Temps*. "What a paper!" he says. "When it comes to defending the French race, it hasn't its equal!" And quick to show I'm well informed, I fire back: "The French race can do with some defending, seeing as it doesn't exist!"

"Oh yes, it does!" he says. "And a fine race it is! The finest in the world, and anybody who says different is a yellow dog!" And he starts slanging me. Naturally I stuck to my guns.

"It's not true! What you call a race is nothing but a collection of riff-raff like me, bleary-eyed, flea-bitten, chilled to the bone. They came from the four corners of the earth, driven by hunger, plague, tumours and the cold, and stopped here. They couldn't go any further because of the ocean. That's France, that's the French people."

"Bardamu," he says very gravely and a bit sadly, "our forefathers were as good as we are, don't speak ill of them!..."

“You’re right, Arthur, there you’re right! Hateful and spineless, raped and robbed, mangled and witless, they were as good as we are, you can say that again! We never change! Neither our socks nor our masters nor our opinions, or we’re so slow about it that it’s no use. We were born loyal, and that’s what killed us! Soldiers free of charge, heroes for everyone else, talking monkeys, tortured words, we are the minions of King Misery. He’s our lord and master! When we misbehave, he tightens his grip... his fingers are around our neck, that makes it hard to talk, got to be careful if we want to eat... For nothing at all he’ll choke you... It’s not a life...”

“There’s love, Bardamu!”

“Arthur,” I tell him, “love is the infinite placed within the reach of poodles. I have my dignity!”

“You do, do you? You’re an anarchist, that’s what you are!”

A wise guy, as you see, with only the most advanced opinions.

“That’s right, you windbag, I’m an anarchist! And to prove it, I’ve written a kind of prayer of social vengeance, it’ll bowl you over: *The Golden Wings!* That’s the title!” And so I recite:

*“A God who counts minutes and pennies, a desperate sensual God, who grunts like a pig. A pig with golden wings, who falls and falls, always belly side up, ready for caresses, that’s him, our master. Come, kiss me!”*

“Your little piece doesn’t hold water,” he says. “I’m for the established order, and I’m not interested in politics. What’s more, the day my country asks me to shed my blood, it’ll find me ready, and no slacker.” That’s what he said.

It so happened that the war was creeping up on us without our knowing it, and something was wrong with my wits. That short but animated discussion had tired me out. Besides, I was upset because the waiter had sort of called me a piker on account of the tip. Well, in the end Arthur and I made up. Completely. We agreed about almost everything.

“It’s true,” I said, trying to be conciliatory. “All in all, you’re right. But the fact is we’re all sitting in a big galley, pulling at the oars with all our might. You can’t tell me different!... Sitting on nails and pulling like mad! And what do we get for it? Nothing! Thrashings and misery, hard words and hard knocks. We’re workers, they say. Work, they call it! That’s the crummiest part of the whole business. We’re down in the

hold, heaving and panting, stinking and sweating our balls off, and – meanwhile! – up on deck in the fresh air, what do you see? Our masters having a fine time with beautiful pink and perfumed women on their laps. They send for us, we’re brought up on deck. They put on their top hats and give us a big spiel like as follows: ‘You no-good swine! We’re at war! Those stinkers in Country No. 2! We’re going to board them and cut their livers out! Let’s go! Let’s go! We’ve got everything we need on board! All together now! Let’s hear you shout so the deck trembles: “Long live Country No. 1!” So you’ll be heard for miles around. The man that shouts the loudest will get a medal and a lollipop! Let’s go! And if there’s anybody that doesn’t want to be killed on the sea, he can go and get killed on land, it’s even quicker!’”

“That’s the way it is exactly,” said Arthur, suddenly willing to listen to reason.

But just then, who should come marching past the café where we’re sitting but a regiment with the colonel up front on his horse, looking nice and friendly, a fine figure of a man! Enthusiasm lifted me to my feet.

“I’ll just go see if that’s the way it is!” I sing out to Arthur, and off I go to enlist, on the double.

“Ferdinand!” he yells back. “Don’t be an arse!” I suppose he was nettled by the effect my heroism was having on the people all around us.

It kind of hurt my feelings the way he was taking it, but that didn’t stop me. I fell right in. “Here I am!” I say to myself. “And here I stay!”

I just had time to call out to Arthur: “All right, you jerk, we’ll see” – before we turned the corner. And there I was with the regiment, marching behind the colonel and his band. That’s exactly how it happened.

We marched a long time. There were streets and more streets, and they were all crowded with civilians and their wives, cheering us on, bombarding us with flowers from café terraces, railway stations, crowded churches. You never saw so many patriots in all your life! And then there were fewer patriots... It started to rain, and then there were still fewer and fewer, and not a single cheer, not one.

Pretty soon there was nobody but us, we were all alone. Row after row. The music had stopped. “Come to think of it,” I said to myself, when I saw what was what, “this is no fun any more! I’d better try

something else!” I was about to clear out. Too late! They’d quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats.

\* \* \*

When you’re in, you’re in. They put us on horseback, and after we’d been on horseback for two months, they put us back on our feet. Maybe because of the expense. Anyway, one morning the colonel was looking for his horse, his orderly had made off with it, nobody knew where to, probably some quiet spot that bullets couldn’t get to as easily as the middle of the road. Because that was exactly where the colonel and I had finally stationed ourselves, with me holding his orderly book while he wrote out his orders.

Down the road, way in the distance, as far as we could see, there were two black dots, plunk in the middle like us, but they were two Germans and they’d been busy shooting for the last fifteen or twenty minutes.

Maybe our colonel knew why they were shooting, maybe the Germans knew, but I, so help me, hadn’t the vaguest idea. As far back as I could search my memory, I hadn’t done a thing to the Germans, I’d always treated them friendly and polite. I knew the Germans pretty well, I’d even gone to school in their country when I was little, near Hanover. I’d spoken their language. A bunch of loud-mouthed little halfwits, that’s what they were, with pale, furtive eyes like wolves; we’d go out to the woods together after school to feel the girls up, or we’d fire popguns or pistols you could buy for four marks. And we drank sugary beer together. But from that to shooting at us right in the middle of the road, without so much as a word of introduction, was a long way, a very long way. If you asked me, they were going too far.

This war, in fact, made no sense at all. It couldn’t go on.

Had something weird got into these people? Something I didn’t feel at all? I suppose I hadn’t noticed it...

Anyway, my feelings towards them hadn’t changed. In spite of everything, I’d have liked to understand their brutality, but what I wanted still more, enormously, with all my heart, was to get out of there, because suddenly the whole business looked to me like a great big mistake.

“In a mess like this,” I said to myself, “there’s nothing to be done, all you can do is clear out...”

Over our heads, two millimetres, maybe one millimetre from our temples, those long tempting lines of steel that bullets make when they're out to kill you were whistling through the hot summer air.

I'd never felt so useless as I did amid all those bullets in the sunlight. A vast and universal mockery.

I was only twenty at the time. Deserted farms in the distance, empty wide-open churches, as if the peasants had all gone out for the day to attend a fair at the other end of the county, leaving everything they owned with us for safekeeping, their countryside, their carts with the shafts pointing in the air, their fields, their barnyards, the road, the trees, even the cows, a chained dog, the works. Leaving us free to do as we pleased while they were gone. Nice of them, in a way. "Still," I said to myself, "if they hadn't gone somewhere else, if there were still somebody here, I'm sure we wouldn't be behaving so badly! So disgustingly! We wouldn't dare in front of them!" But there wasn't a soul to watch us! Nobody but us, like newly-weds that start messing around when all the people have gone home.

And another thought I had (behind a tree) was that I wished *Déroulède*\* – the one I'd heard so much about – had been there to describe his reactions when a bullet tore open his guts.

Those Germans squatting on the road, shooting so obstinately, were rotten shots, but they seemed to have ammunition to burn, whole warehouses full, it looked to me. Nobody could say this war was over! I have to hand it to the colonel, his bravery was remarkable! He roamed around in the middle of the road, up and down and back and forth in the midst of the bullets as calmly as if he'd been waiting for a friend on a station platform, except just a tiny bit impatient.

One thing I'd better tell you right away, I've never been able to stomach the country, I've always found it dreary, those endless fields of mud, those houses where nobody's ever home, those roads that don't go anywhere. And if to all that you add a war, it's completely unbearable. A sudden wind had come up on both sides of the road, the clattering leaves of the poplars mingled with the sharp crackling sounds aimed at us from down the road. Those unknown soldiers missed us every time, but they spun a thousand deaths around us, so close they seemed to clothe us. I was afraid to move.

That colonel, I could see, was a monster! Now I knew it for sure, he was worse than a dog, he couldn't conceive of his own death. At the

same time I realized that there must be plenty of brave men like him in our army, and just as many no doubt in the army facing us. How many, I wondered. One or two million, say several millions in all? The thought turned my fear to panic. With such people this infernal lunacy could go on for ever... Why would they stop? Never had the world seemed so implacably doomed.

Could I, I thought, be the last coward on earth? How terrifying!... All alone with two million stark-raving heroic madmen, armed to the eyeballs? With and without helmets, without horses, on motorcycles, bellowing, in cars, screeching, shooting, plotting, flying, kneeling, digging, taking cover, bounding over trails, sputtering, shut up on earth as if it were a loony bin, ready to demolish everything on it, Germany, France, whole continents, everything that breathes, destroy, destroy, madder than mad dogs, worshipping their madness (which dogs don't), a hundred, a thousand times madder than a thousand dogs, and a lot more vicious! A pretty mess we were in! No doubt about it, this crusade I'd let myself in for was the apocalypse.

You can be a virgin in horror the same as in sex. How, when I left the Place Clichy, could I have imagined such horror? Who could have suspected, before getting really into the war, all the ingredients that go to make up the rotten, heroic, good-for-nothing soul of man? And there I was, caught up in a mass flight into collective murder, into the fiery furnace... Something had come up from the depths, and this is what happened.

The colonel was still as cool as a cucumber, I watched him as he stood on the embankment, taking little messages sent by the general, reading them without haste as the bullets flew all around him, and tearing them into little pieces. Did none of those messages include an order to put an immediate stop to this abomination? Did no top brass tell him there had been a misunderstanding? A horrible mistake? A misdeal? That somebody'd got it all wrong, that the plan had been for manoeuvres, a sham battle, not a massacre! Not at all! "Keep it up, colonel! You're doing fine!" That's what General des Entrayes,\* the head of our division and commander over us all, must have written in those notes that were being brought every five minutes by a courier, who looked greener and more shitless each time. I could have palled up with that boy, we'd have been scared together! But we had no time to fraternize.

So there was no mistake? So there was no law against people shooting at people they couldn't even see! It was one of the things you could do without anybody reading you the riot act. In fact, it was recognized and probably encouraged by upstanding citizens, like the draft, or marriage, or hunting!... No two ways about it. I was suddenly on the most intimate terms with war. I'd lost my virginity. You've got to be pretty much alone with her as I was then to get a good look at her, the slut, full face and profile. A war had been switched on between us and the other side, and now it was burning! Like the current between the two carbons of an arc lamp. And this lamp was in no hurry to go out! It would get us all, the colonel and everyone else, he looked pretty spiffy now, but he wouldn't roast up any bigger than me when the current from the other side got him between the shoulders.

There are different ways of being condemned to death. Oh! What wouldn't I have given to be in jail instead of here! What a fool I'd been! If only I had had a little foresight and stolen something or other when it would have been so easy and there was still time. I never think of anything! You come out of jail alive, out of a war you don't. The rest is blarney.

If only I'd had time, but I didn't! There was nothing left to steal! How pleasant it would be in a cosy little jailhouse, I said to myself, where the bullets couldn't get in! Where they never got in! I knew of one that was ready and waiting, all sunny and warm! I saw it in my dreams, the jailhouse of Saint-Germain to be exact, right near the forest. I knew it well, I'd often passed that way. How a man changes! I was a child in those days, and that jail frightened me. Because I didn't know what men are like. Never again will I believe what they say or what they think. Men are the thing to be afraid of, always, men and nothing else.

How much longer would this madness have to go on before these monsters dropped with exhaustion? How long could a convulsion like this last? Months? Years? How many? Maybe till everyone's dead? All these lunatics? Every last one of them? And seeing as events were taking such a desperate turn, I decided to stake everything on one throw, to make one last try, to see if I couldn't stop the war, just me, all by myself! At least in this one spot where I happened to be.

The colonel was only two steps away from me, pacing. I'd talk to him. Something I'd never done. This was a time for daring. The way

things stood, there was practically nothing to lose. “What is it?” he’d ask me, startled, I imagined, at my bold interruption. Then I’d explain the situation as I saw it, and we’d see what he thought. The main thing is to talk things over. Two heads are better than one.

I was about to take that decisive step when, at that very moment, who should arrive on the double but a dismounted cavalryman (as we said in those days), exhausted, shaky in the joints, holding his helmet upside down in one hand like Belisarius,\* trembling, all covered with mud, his face even greener than the courier I mentioned before. He stammered and gulped. You’d have thought he was struggling to climb out of a tomb, and it made him sick to his stomach. Could it be that this spook didn’t like bullets any more than I did? That he saw them coming like me?

“What is it?” Disturbed, the Colonel stopped him short; the glance he flung at that ghost was of steel.

It made our colonel very angry to see that wretched cavalryman so incorrectly clad and shitting in his pants with fright. The colonel had no use for fear, that was a sure thing. And especially that helmet held in hand like a bowler was really too much in a combat regiment like ours that was just getting into the war. It was as if this dismounted cavalryman had seen the war and taken his hat off in greeting.

Under the colonel’s withering look the wobbly messenger snapped to attention, pressing his little finger to the seam of his trousers as the occasion demanded. And so he stood on the embankment, stiff as a board, swaying, the sweat running down his chinstrap; his jaws were trembling so hard that little abortive cries kept coming out of him, like a puppy dreaming. You couldn’t make out whether he wanted to speak to us or whether he was crying.

Our Germans squatting at the end of the road had just changed instruments. Now they were having their fun with a machine gun, sputtering like handfuls of matches, and all around us flew swarms of angry bullets, as hostile as wasps.

The man finally managed to articulate a few words:

“Colonel, sir, Sergeant Barousse has been killed.”

“So what?”

“He was on his way to meet the bread wagon on the Étrapes road, sir.”

“So what?”

“He was blown up by a shell!”

“So what, damn it!”

“That’s what, colonel, sir.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, sir, that’s all, colonel, sir.”

“What about the bread?” the colonel asked.

That was the end of the dialogue, because, I remember distinctly, he barely had time to say “What about the bread?” That was all. After that there was nothing but flame and noise. The kind of noise you wouldn’t have thought possible. Our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth were so full of that noise I thought it was all over and I’d turned into noise and flame myself.

After a while the flame went away, the noise stayed in my head, and my arms and legs trembled as if somebody were shaking me from behind. My limbs seemed to be leaving me, but then in the end they stayed on. The smoke stung my eyes for a long time, and the prickly smell of powder and sulphur hung on, strong enough to kill all the fleas and bedbugs in the whole world.

I thought of Sergeant Barousse, who had just gone up in smoke like the man told us. That was good news. Great, I thought to myself. That makes one less stinker in the regiment! He wanted to have me court-martialled for a can of meat. “To each his own war!” I said to myself. In that respect, you can’t deny it, the war seemed to serve a purpose now and then! I knew of three or four more in the regiment, real scum, that I’d have gladly helped to make the acquaintance of a shell, like Barousse.

As for the colonel, I didn’t wish him any hard luck. But he was dead too. At first I didn’t see him. The blast had carried him up the embankment and laid him down on his side, right in the arms of the dismounted cavalryman, the courier, who was finished too. They were embracing each other for the moment and for all eternity, but the cavalryman’s head was gone, all he had was an opening at the top of the neck, with blood in it bubbling and glugging like jam in a kettle. The colonel’s belly was wide open, and he was making a nasty face about it. It must have hurt when it happened. Tough shit for him! If he’d got out when the shooting started, it wouldn’t have happened.

All that tangled meat was bleeding profusely.

Shells were still bursting to the right and left of the scene.

I'd had enough, I was glad to have such a good pretext for making myself scarce. I even hummed a tune, and reeled like when you've been rowing a long way and your legs are wobbly. "Just one shell!" I said to myself. "Amazing how quick just one shell can clean things up. Could you believe it?" I kept saying to myself. "Could you believe it!"

There was nobody left at the end of the road. The Germans were gone. But that little episode had taught me a quick lesson, to keep to the cover of the trees. I was in a hurry to get back to our command post, to see if anyone else in our regiment had been killed on reconnaissance. There must be some good dodges, I said to myself, for getting taken prisoner!... Here and there in the fields a few puffs of smoke still clung to the ground. "Maybe they're all dead," I thought. "Seeing how they refuse to understand anything whatsoever, the best solution would be for them all to get killed instantly... The war would be over, and we'd go home... Maybe we'd march across the Place Clichy in triumph... Just one or two survivors... In my dream... Strapping good fellows marching behind the general, all the rest would be dead like the colonel... Like Barousse... like Vanaille (another bastard)... etc. They'd shower us with decorations and flowers, we'd march through the Arc de Triomphe. We'd go to a restaurant, they'd serve us free of charge, we'd never pay for anything any more, never as long as we lived! 'We're heroes!' we'd say when they brought the bill... Defenders of the Fatherland! That would do it!... We'd pay with little French flags!... The lady at the till would refuse to take money from heroes, she'd even give us some, with kisses thrown in, as we filed out. Life would be worth living."

As I was running, I noticed my arm was bleeding, just a little though, a far from satisfactory wound, a scratch. I'd have to start all over.

It was raining again, the fields of Flanders oozed with dirty water. For a long time I didn't meet a soul, only the wind and a little later the sun. From time to time, I couldn't tell from where, a bullet would come flying merrily through the air and sunshine, looking for me, intent on killing me, there in the wilderness. Why? Never again, not if I lived another hundred years, would I go walking in the country. A solemn oath.

Walking along, I remembered the ceremony of the day before. It had taken place in a meadow, at the foot of a hill; the colonel had harangued the regiment in his booming voice: "Go to it, boys!" he had cried. "Go to it, boys! And long live France!" When you have no

imagination, dying is small beer; when you do have an imagination, dying is too much. That's my opinion. My understanding has never taken in so many things at once.

The colonel had never had any imagination. That was the source of all his trouble, and of ours even more so. Was I the only man in that regiment with any imagination about death? I preferred my own kind of death, the kind that comes late... in twenty years... thirty... maybe more... to this death they were trying to deal me right away... eating Flanders mud, my whole mouth full of it, fuller than full, split to the ears by a shell fragment. A man's entitled to an opinion about his own death. But which way, if that was the case, should I go? Straight ahead? My back to the enemy. If the gendarmes were to catch me roaming around I knew my goose was cooked. They'd give me a slapdash trial that same afternoon in some deserted classroom... There were lots of empty classrooms wherever we went. They'd play court martial with me the way kids play when the teacher isn't there. The non-coms seated on the platform, me standing in handcuffs in front of the little desks. In the morning they'd shoot me: twelve bullets plus one. So what was the answer?

And I thought of the colonel again, such a brave man with his breastplate and his helmet and his moustache, if they had exhibited him in a music hall, walking as I saw him under the bullets and shellfire, he'd have filled the Alhambra, he'd have outshone Fragson,\* and he was a big star at the time I'm telling you about. That's what I was thinking. My heart was down in the dumps.

After hours and hours of cautious, furtive walking, I finally caught sight of our men near a clump of farmhouses. That was one of our advance posts. It belonged to a squadron that was billeted nearby. Nobody killed, they told me. Every last one of them alive! I was the one with the big news: "The colonel's dead!" I shouted, as soon as I was near enough. "Plenty more colonels where he came from!" That was the snappy comeback of Corporal Pistil, who was on duty just then; what's more, he was organizing details.

"All right, you jerk, until they find a replacement for the colonel, you can be picking up meat with Empouille and Kerdoncuff here, take two sacks each. The distribution point is behind the church... the one you see over there... Don't let them give you a lot of bones like yesterday, and try and get back before nightfall, you lugs!"

So I hit the road again with the other two.

That pissed me off. "I'll never tell them anything after this," I said to myself. I could see it was no use talking to those people, a tragedy like what I'd just seen was wasted on such stinkers! It had happened too long ago to capture their interest. And to think that a week earlier they'd have given me four columns and my picture in the papers for the death of a colonel the way I'd seen it. A bunch of halfwits.

The meat for the whole regiment was being distributed in a summery field, shaded by cherry trees and parched by the August sun. On sacks and tent cloths spread out on the grass there were pounds and pounds of guts, chunks of white and yellow fat, disembowelled sheep with their organs every which way, oozing intricate little rivulets into the grass round about, a whole ox, split down the middle, hanging on a tree, and four regimental butchers all hacking away at it, cursing and swearing and pulling off choice morsels. The squadrons were fighting tooth and nail over the innards, especially the kidneys, and all around them swarms of flies such as one sees only on such occasions, as self-important and musical as little birds.

Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope. A few steps further on, the last pig was being killed. Already four men and a butcher were fighting over some of the prospective cuts.

"You crook, you! You're the one that made off with the tenderloin yesterday!..."

Leaning against a tree, I had barely time enough to honour that alimentary dispute with two or three glances, before being overcome by an enormous urge to vomit, which I did so hard that I passed out.

They carried me back to the outfit on a stretcher. Naturally they swiped my two oilcloth sacks, the change was too good to miss.

I woke up to one of the Corporal's harangues. The war wasn't over.

\* \* \*

Anything can happen, and I in my turn became a corporal at the end of that same month of August. Many a time I was sent to headquarters with five men for liaison duty under General des Entrayes. He was a little man, he didn't say much, and at first sight he seemed neither cruel nor heroic. But it was safer to suspend judgement... What he seemed to value most of all was his comfort. In fact he thought of his comfort

all the time, and even when we'd been busy retreating for more than a month, he'd chew everybody out in every new stopping place if his orderly hadn't found him a nice clean bed and a kitchen with all the modern appliances.

This love of comfort gave our chief of staff, with his four stripes, a lot of trouble. The General's domestic requirements got on his nerves. Especially since he himself, yellow, gastritic in the extreme and constipated, wasn't the least bit interested in food. But he had to eat his soft-boiled eggs at the general's table all the same, and listen on that occasion to his complaints. Those are the things a soldier has to put up with. But I couldn't feel sorry for him, because as an officer he was a first-rate swine. Judge for yourself. After a whole day spent dragging ourselves up hill and down glade, through carrots and clover, we'd finally stop so the general could get to sleep somewhere. We'd find him a quiet, sheltered village, where no troops had been billeted yet, or if they had been, they'd have to move on in a hurry, we'd throw them out even if they'd already stacked their rifles, and they'd just have to spend the night in the open.

The village was reserved for the general staff, its horses, its mess, its luggage, and not least for that stinking major. The bastard's name was Pinçon, Major Pinçon. I hope they've killed him off by now (and not pleasantly). But at the time I'm talking about Pinçon was disgustingly alive. Every evening he'd send for us liaison men and give us a good chewing-out, to keep us on our toes and fire us with enthusiasm. Then he'd send us all over the place, after we'd run errands for the General all day. Dismount! Mount! Dismount again! And more of the same, carrying his orders in all directions. They might just as well have drowned us. It would have been more convenient for everybody.

"Dismissed!" he'd yell. "Get back to your regiments! And on the double!"

"Where is the regiment, sir?" we'd ask...

"At Barbagny?"\*

"Where's Barbagny?"

"Over there!"

Over there, where he pointed, there'd be nothing but darkness, same as everywhere else, an enormous darkness that swallowed up the road two steps ahead of us, only a little sliver of road about the size of your tongue was spared by the darkness.

This Barbagny of his was at the end of the world. Try and find it! To find his Barbagny you'd have had to sacrifice at least a whole squadron! A squadron of brave men, what's more! And I wasn't brave at all, I couldn't see any reason to be brave, so obviously I had less desire than anyone else to find his Barbagny, the situation of which, incidentally, was pure guesswork as far as he was concerned. Maybe they thought they could make me go and commit suicide if they yelled loud enough. But either you have it in you or you don't.

I knew only one thing about that blackness, which was so dense you had the impression that if you stretched out your arm a little way from your shoulder you'd never see it again, but of that one thing I was absolutely certain, namely, that it was full of homicidal impulses.

As soon as night fell, that big-mouth major couldn't wait to send us to our deaths; it was something that came over him at sundown. We'd try a bit of passive resistance, we'd pretend not to understand, we'd try to take root in that cosy little billet, but when we finally couldn't see the trees, we had to resign ourselves to going away and dying a little; the General's dinner was ready.

From then on, it was all a matter of luck. Sometimes we'd find Barbagny and the regiment and sometimes we wouldn't. When we found it, it was mostly by mistake, because the squadron sentries would start shooting at us. So naturally we'd advance and be recognized, and usually spend the night doing all sorts of details, carrying numberless bales of oats and buckets of water, and getting chewed out till our heads reeled, in addition to dropping with sleep.

In the morning, our liaison team, all five of us, would report back to General des Entrayes and get on with the war.

But most of the time we didn't find the regiment and we'd circle around villages on unknown trails, keeping away from evacuated hamlets and treacherous thickets – as much as possible we avoided those kinds of things because of German patrols. We had to be somewhere though while waiting, somewhere in the darkness. Some things couldn't be avoided. Ever since then I've known how wild rabbits must feel.

Pity comes in funny ways. If we'd told Major Pinçon that he was nothing but a cowardly stinking murderer, we'd only have given him pleasure, the pleasure of having us shot without delay by the MP captain, who was always following him around and who lived for nothing else. It wasn't the Germans that MP captain had it in for.

So for night after idiotic night we crept from ambush to ambush, sustained only by the decreasingly plausible hope of coming out alive, that and no other, and if we did come out alive one thing was sure: that we'd never, absolutely never, forget that we had discovered on earth a man shaped like you and me, but a thousand times more ferocious than the crocodiles and sharks with wide-open jaws that circle just below the surface around the shiploads of garbage and rotten meat that get chucked overboard in the Havana roadstead.

The biggest defeat in every department of life is to forget, especially the things that have done you in, and to die without realizing how far people can go in the way of crumminess. When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of the human viciousness we've seen without changing one word. When that's done, we can curl up our toes and sink into the pit. That's work enough for a lifetime.

I'd gladly have fed Major Pinçon to the sharks and his MP with him, to teach them how to live; my horse too while I was at it, so he wouldn't have to suffer any more; the poor fellow didn't have any back left it was so sore, only two plaques of raw flesh under the saddle, as big as my two hands, oozing rivers of pus that ran from the edges of his blanket down to his hocks. I had to ride him all the same, trot-trot... That trot-trot made him wriggle and writhe. But horses are even more patient than people. His trot was an undulation. I had to leave him out in the open. In a barn the smell of his open wounds would have been asphyxiating. When I mounted him, his back hurt him so badly that he arched it, oh, very politely, and his belly hung down to his knees. It felt like mounting a donkey. It was easier that way, I have to admit. We were tired enough ourselves with all the steel we had to carry on our heads and shoulders.

General des Entrayes was waiting for his dinner in his specially requisitioned house. The table had been set, the lamp was in its place.

"Beat it, Christ Almighty, the whole lot of you!" Pinçon yelled at us one more time, shaking his lantern under our noses. "We're sitting down to table! I'm telling you for the last time! Are those swine ever going to go!" he screamed. The passion of sending us to our death put a little colour into his diaphanous cheeks.

Sometimes the General's cook would slip us a bite before we left. The General had too much to eat, seeing the regulations allowed him forty rations all for himself! He wasn't a young man any more. In fact

he must have been close to retirement age. His knees buckled when he walked and I'm pretty sure he dyed his moustache.

The veins in his temples, we could see in the lamplight as we were leaving, described meanders like the Seine on its way out of Paris. He had grown-up daughters, so it was said, unmarried and, like himself, not rich. Maybe those were the thoughts that made him so crotchety and cranky, like an old dog disturbed in his habits, who goes looking for his quilted basket whenever anyone opens the door for him.

He loved beautiful gardens and rosebushes. Wherever we went, he never passed up a rose garden. When it comes to loving roses, generals haven't their equal. It's a known fact.

Anyway, we finally set out. It was hard to get the plugs started. They were afraid to move because of their wounds, but in addition they were afraid of us and the darkness, afraid of everything, to tell the truth. So were we! A dozen times we went back to ask the major for directions! A dozen times he cursed us as cowards and filthy laggards. Finally, with the help of our spurs, we'd pass the last outpost, give the sentries the password, and plunge into our murky adventure, into the darkness of this no man's land.

After wandering a while from side to side of the darkness, we finally got part of our bearings, or so at least we thought... Whenever one cloud seemed lighter than another, we were convinced that we'd seen something... But up ahead of us there was nothing we could be sure of but the echo that came and went, the echo of our horses' hoof beats, a horrendous sound you wanted so bad not to hear that it stopped your breath. Those horses seemed to be trotting to high heaven, to be calling everybody on earth to come and massacre us. And they could have done it with one hand, just steady a rifle against a tree and wait for us. I kept thinking that the first light we'd see would be the flash of the shot that would end it all.

In the four weeks the war had been going on, we'd grown so tired, so miserable, that tiredness had taken away some of my fear. In the end the torture of being harassed night and day by those monsters, the non-coms, especially the low-ranking ones, who were even stupider, pettier and more hateful than usual, made even the most obstinate among us doubt the advisability of going on living.

Oh, how you long to get away! To sleep! That's the main thing! When it becomes really impossible to get away and sleep, then the will to live

evaporates of its own accord. As long as we were still alive, we'd just have to look as if we were looking for our regiment.

Before a thought can start up in the brain of a numbskull, a lot of cruel things must happen to him. The man who had made me think for the first time in my life, really think, practical thoughts that were really my own, was undoubtedly Major Pinçon, that torture master. I therefore thought of him as hard as I could as I clanked along, crushed by the weight of my armour, an extra in this incredible international extravaganza, into which, I have to admit, I had leapt with enthusiasm.

Every yard of darkness ahead of us was a promise of death and destruction. But how would it come? The only element of uncertainty was the uniform of the killer. Would he be one of us? Or of them?

I hadn't done anything to Pinçon! No more than I had to the Germans!... With his face like a rotten peach, his four bands that glittered all over him from his head to his belly button, his scraggly moustache and his bony knees, with the field glasses dangling from his neck like a cowbell and his 1/1,000 map. I kept wondering why he was so intent on sending other people to their death. Other people who had no maps.

We four horsemen on the road were making as much noise as a battalion. They must have heard us coming ten miles away, or else they didn't want to hear us. That was always a possibility... Maybe the Germans were afraid of us? Why not?

A month of sleepiness on every eyelid, that's what we were carrying, and as much again in the backs of our heads, plus all those pounds of tin.

The men in my party didn't express themselves very well. Actually they hardly spoke at all. They'd come from the ends of Brittany, and what they knew they hadn't learnt at school but in the army. That night I tried to make a little conversation about the village of Barbagny with the one next to me and who was called Kersuzon.

"Kersuzon," I say. "We're in the Ardennes now... Do you see anything in the distance? I don't see a damn thing..."

"It's as black as an arsehole," Kersuzon says. That was enough...

"But," I suggest, "haven't you heard anyone mention Barbagny in the course of the day? Give you an idea where it is?"

"No."