

Copyrighted Material

I

He was walking. For at least three kilometres he was alone on a road across which tree trunks cast oblique shadows every ten metres, and he strode on, without hurrying, from one dark strip of shade to the next. Since it was near midday and the sun was reaching its height, a grotesquely foreshortened shadow, his own, slipped along ahead of him.

The road led straight up to the summit of the hill, where it seemed to vanish from view. On the left, things rustled in the woods. On the right, in the gently rolling fields, there was just one horse, far in the distance, a white horse, pulling a wine-vat mounted on wheels; in the same field stood a scarecrow, or it might have been a man.

The red bus was at that moment leaving Saint-Amand, where it was market day, edging its way out, accompanied by blasts on the horn, before emerging at last from the interminable street of whitewashed houses to drive along the road lined with elm trees. It stopped again to pick up a farm woman, waiting under an umbrella because of the sun. There were no free seats left. The woman did not attempt to put down her two baskets but stood swaying to and fro between two benches, her eyes glazed over like an ailing chicken.

'It was Jeanine told me. She was in the next seats,

and even she was disgusted! And for Jeanine to be disgusted . . . !'

The driver sat expressionless in his uniform cap, his mauve tie slightly askew, his eyes fixed on the dark stripes across the road. 'No smoking', the notice read. The cigarette stuck to his lower lip was unlit.

'Yeah,' he said, in the tone of a man who knows what he is talking about. And the plump girl, who had taken the seat next to him a quarter of an hour before the bus left, carried on whispering, interrupting herself now and then with a giggle.

'Well, first it was Léon, the boy from the barber's . . . Then Lolotte. Then this lad from Montluçon that works in the aircraft factory? And then Rose.'

'Rose? Who's Rose?'

'You must know. You see her on her bike every day on the road. The butcher's daughter, from Tilly? Big girl, red cheeks and pop-eyes, and her dresses are always too short. She goes into Saint-Amand for her shorthand-typing lessons. No better than she should be, mind.'

Chickens and ducks were stirring in their baskets. Forty or more women, dressed in black, were tightly packed on to the bench seats and almost all of them sat silently looking straight to the front, heads swaying right and left with the movements of the bus: now and again, the top halves of their bodies jerked forward together.

Ten, nine, then eight kilometres ahead of them, the man was still walking, like someone going nowhere in particular and thinking about nothing. He had no luggage, no

parcels, no walking stick, not even a switch cut from the roadside. His arms swung casually at his sides.

‘So it was Léon started it, with Lolotte, and she laughed so loud that a lot of people in the cinema were going “Hush!”’

The heavy red bus drew nearer. A grey motorcar overtook it. Not locals, people from far away, passing through. The car, going fast, started up the hill. The man walking heard it approach but did not slow down, simply turned his head a little and raised his arm, without conviction.

The car didn’t stop. The woman next to the bus driver asked:

‘What did he want?’

Craning her neck, she saw the tall, thin shape going from the shadow of one tree to the next, and almost at once the car disappeared over the hill.

The bus followed, groaning with the change of gear and vibrating. The widow by the name of Couderc, sitting behind the driver, raised her eyes anxiously to the roof, on which they could hear the parcels being jolted.

The man on the road raised his arm again. The bus stopped alongside him. Without leaving his seat, in a practised movement, the driver opened the door.

‘Where to?’

The man glanced round and said casually:

‘Don’t mind. Where are you going?’

‘Montluçon.’

‘That’ll do.’

‘All the way to Montluçon? Eight francs.’

The bus moved off again. Standing, the man searched

his pockets, pulled out a five-franc coin, a two-franc piece, then, without apparently worrying, felt in all his other pockets until he found fifty centimes.

‘Here you are, seven fifty, and I’ll get off a bit before Montluçon.’

The women returning from market stared at him. The widow looked at him differently from the others. The girl alongside the driver did too, since she had not come across anyone like this before.

The bus strained going up the hill. Draughts of cool air came in through the open vents. The widow had a lock of hair falling over her forehead, her chignon was coming undone, and her pink petticoat, an odd bluish pink, hung down below the hem of her dress.

They could hear the sound of bells, though there was no church in sight. It must be midday. At a house by the roadside, one woman got off the bus, in front of a doorstep where two children were sitting.

Wasn’t it rather odd that, out of forty people, only the widow was looking at the man differently from the way anyone might look at a person? The other women were as placid and quiet as cows in a field watching a wolf prowl round them, without any alarm.

And yet this was a man such as they had never seen before on the bus that took them every Saturday to market. The widow had cottoned on the moment she set eyes on him. She had seen him try the car before hailing the bus. She had noticed that he was empty-handed. And you don’t walk empty-handed along a country highway with no idea where you are going.

She did not forget to listen out for the parcels jolting on the roof, but neither did she take her eyes off him, noting everything: the imperfectly shaved cheeks, the clear eyes staring into space, the grey suit that was shabby yet had an air about it, and the expensive shoes. A man capable of walking soundlessly and leaping like a cat. And who, after giving the bus driver seven francs fifty for his blue ticket, probably had no more money on him.

He was observing her too, screwing up his eyes to see her better, and his lips curled as if he was inwardly smiling. Was it the mole on her left cheek that amused him? A birthmark about the size of a five-franc coin, covered in silky brown hairs, as if someone had grafted there the skin of an animal, a polecat for instance.

The bus had already started downhill, over the rise. Behind the trees you could glimpse the river, the Cher, its waters foaming as it tumbled over the stones.

The widow too was trying to hide a smile. The man blinked his eyes. It was as if, among all these housewives, their heads nodding in unison, they had recognized each other.

As a result, she almost missed her stop. She suddenly realized that they were at the bottom of the hill. She leaned over and tapped the shoulder of the driver, who braked.

‘You’ll have to give me a hand with my incubator,’ she said.

She was short and broad, rather well-covered. It was quite a business to alight from the bus with all her baskets,

because she began by trying to step off first, then she preferred to lower her baskets to the road instead.

The driver jumped down. The thirty or forty women in the bus watched, without a word. A little house could be seen not far off, a tiny two-roomed house with a blue painted fence round it.

‘Mind you don’t break anything. They’re fragile, these contraptions.’

The driver had climbed the iron ladder attached to the rear of the bus in order to reach the roof and was handing her down a bulky box with four feet, which she caught and laid carefully on the ground.

She felt for a two-franc coin in a purse full of change and held it out.

‘Here you are, son.’

But it was the man from the road that she was looking at, with a shade of regret.

The bus moved off. Through the rear window, the man could see the widow standing at the roadside next to her enormous box and her baskets.

‘Just like her niece,’ said the plump girl sitting next to the driver. ‘You know her, Félicie?’

The man could have sat down, now that there was a free seat. He remained standing. They went round a bend. The widow and the little house vanished. Then he leaned forward and, in turn, tapped the driver’s shoulder.

‘Can you drop me off here?’

Every head turned, when the bus set off again, to watch the man walk back in the other direction, and the girl gave the driver her reaction.

‘Odd chap, eh?’

It was further to walk than he had realized. It took him several minutes before he came once more within sight of the little house, the parcels at the roadside and the widow, who had opened the gate and was knocking at the door.

She watched him arrive without surprise. As he stopped, she came over to the fence.

‘I thought she’d be home, Madame Bichat, so she could lend me her wheelbarrow!’ she said. ‘But will you look at that, everything’s shut up!’

Nevertheless, she called out in a shrill voice, peering in all directions:

‘Clémence! Clémence!’

Then:

‘Where can she have got to, she never goes out? Maybe she’s had bad news about her sister.’

She went right round the house but found another locked door.

‘Now if I could just find the wheelbarrow.’

But there was only a vegetable plot and some flowers. No wheelbarrow. A turtle dove in a cage.

‘Is it far to where you live?’ the man asked.

‘Six hundred metres, just by the canal. I was counting on using Clémence’s wheelbarrow.’

‘Would you like me to give you a hand?’

She didn’t say no. She was expecting this.

‘Think you can carry the incubator on your own? Careful, mind, it’s fragile.’

And all the time, she kept glancing curiously at him, already with a satisfied expression.

‘I got it secondhand. I saw it outside the ironmonger’s, just as I was getting to market . . . I offered him two hundred francs. It was only when I was getting on the bus he let me have it for three hundred. Not too heavy, is it?’

It was awkward to carry but not heavy. Things rattled inside.

‘Careful, there’s a lamp in there.’

She followed him, laden with her baskets. They took a footpath lined with hazel bushes and deep in shadow, and the ground felt soft under their feet, as if in a wood.

Drops of sweat appeared on the man’s forehead.

‘Looking for work, are you?’ she asked, taking extra steps to catch up with him, since he was walking fast.

He did not reply. His shirt was beginning to cling to his body. He was afraid he might let go, as his hands felt slippery.

‘Wait, let me open the door.’

It was already open on to a large kitchen, and on coming in from outside it was hard to see anything in the semi-darkness.

‘Put it down there. In a minute we can . . .’

A ginger cat rubbed up against her legs. She laid the baskets on a scrubbed wooden table. Then she opened another door, and sunlight flooded the room from the garden side. As she went past, the man could smell her armpits.

‘Sit down a minute. I’ll fetch you a glass of wine.’

What was wrong? She was showing anxiety like an animal returning to its lair and sensing a foreign intrusion. How was it that she noticed the grease stain on the table?

It was hardly visible. She looked up at the two hams hanging from a beam and suddenly her eyes flashed with anger.

‘Wait. Stay where you are . . .’

And she rushed out into the garden, which was a farm-yard in fact, with a dunghill, a wagon tilted on to its shafts, and a mixture of chickens, ducks and geese.

He watched from the doorway as she strode off like a woman who knows exactly where she is going. He realized there was someone walking quickly ahead of her, as if running away, a slender young girl, about sixteen perhaps, carrying a baby.

The girl headed for a gate on the other side of which lay the canal and a footbridge. She hurried her step. But the widow was faster. She caught up with her, and he could see that she was speaking vehemently and angrily, though he couldn’t hear what was being said. The girl was holding the baby with one hand, the other was hidden under her blue checked smock.

That was the hand Madame Couderc grabbed, seizing a small packet wrapped in newspaper.

What was she shouting after the youngster, who was running away now? Insults, no doubt. She banged the gate shut, and came back towards the house, holding the packet. She opened another door, leading to an out-building of some kind, and hauled out an old man, whom she made walk in front of her, dragging his feet and hanging his head as he went.

‘Little so-and-so!’ she declared as she came inside and threw on the table the two thick slices of ham that had

been wrapped in the newspaper. ‘Soon as I turn my back, she’s over here to see her grandad and pinch my ham. You wouldn’t understand. A slut! Only sixteen, and she’s already got a baby.’

She threw a ferocious glare at the old man, who was standing still, looking at nothing.

‘And that old goat would let her have everything in the house.’

The old goat did not flinch but stared with curiosity at the box in the middle of the kitchen, partly wrapped in grey paper.

‘He’s ashamed now . . . He knows he’ll pay for it. See his expression.’

She opened a brown-painted cupboard, took out two glasses, showed them to the old man and then put a jug in his hand.

‘He’s deaf as a post . . . Can’t even speak, ever since he fell off a hay cart. Just a waste of space. Doesn’t stop him being nice to Tati now and then for a bit of you know what . . .’

A glint came into her eyes, and she looked the stranger up and down.

‘That’s what they call me, Tati. Since I was little. I don’t even know why. He’s gone to draw off some wine. You’re foreign, aren’t you?’

It was as if she was hesitating to take him in hand. She was still a little suspicious.

‘No . . . French.’

‘Ah . . .’

That was disappointing. She did not hide it.

‘Now I’d have sworn you were foreign. We get them coming past like you, now and then. The Chagots, over in Drevant, they had one for years, a Yugo, slept in the stable and could turn his hand to anything.’

It was the man’s turn to murmur:

‘Ah.’

‘What’s your name, then?’

‘Jean.’

All this time, she was unloading things from her baskets: two overalls, a packet of noodles, a few tins of sardines, a reel of black cotton, some cooked meats wrapped in greasy paper. The old man came back with the jug full of ice-cold white wine.

‘Why don’t you sit down? You want to go to Montluçon?’

‘Doesn’t much matter.’

‘To work in a factory, then?’

She had shovelled more coal into the stove and poured water into a saucepan.

‘Do you know how to fix an artificial incubator?’

‘I think I could work it out.’

‘Wait till I feed the chickens. Maybe we can come to some arrangement.’

She sat down to take off her shoes and put on black clogs. The pink petticoat, a bright shade of pink with a blue sheen, was still hanging below her hem, and it was impossible not to stare at the silky mark, like fur, on her cheek.

‘Have a drink, why don’t you? And look at the old goat, he doesn’t dare help himself because I surprised him with that little so-and-so, Félicie.’

She poured out a glass for him. The old man was tall and thin, his cheeks covered in grey stubble, his eyes red-rimmed.

‘Yes, drink away, Couderc!’ she shouted in his ear. ‘But if you want any hanky-panky, you’ll have to wait for it now.’

How many times had she been round the kitchen? And yet not a single movement was wasted. The two slices of ham had been put in a cupboard. Water was heating on the stove. The fire, banked up again, was burning. All the provisions she had brought had been stowed away, and now out she went with a basket full of grain.

‘Chicky, chicky . . .’

He could see her in the sun by the wagon, leaning against its shafts, surrounded by at least a hundred chickens, all white, and behind them a combination of ducks, geese and turkeys.

‘Come on, my little ones, chicky, chicky!’

She threw the grain out in handfuls, like a sower, but did not forget Jean, still standing in the doorway.

It was hot. The sun was so high that there was hardly any shade. The old man was sitting in his corner by the fireplace, staring at the floor.

Beyond the garden gate, Jean could see a narrow barge, brightly painted like a toy boat, pulled by a donkey and gliding slowly along the canal. The canal was higher than the farmyard, and it was odd to see a boat at eye level. A little girl with flaxen hair and a red dress was running along the deck. A woman stood knitting, guiding the tiller with her hip.

‘You’ll eat something with us? Saturdays, I don’t put on