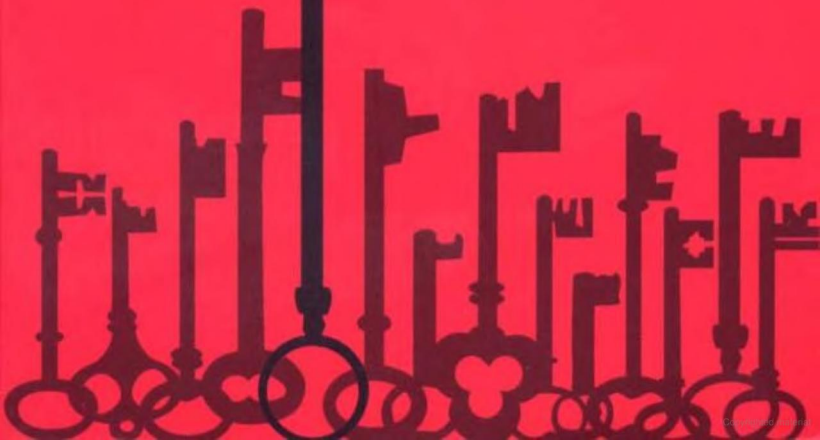
VINTAGE **PEREC**

# LIFE A USER'S MANUAL



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Friendship, history, and literature have supplied me with some of the characters of this book. All other resemblances to living persons or to people having lived in reality or fiction can only be coincidental.

G.P.

Look with all your eyes, look

(Jules Verne, *Michael Strogoff*)

# *Preamble*

The eye follows the paths that have
been laid down for it in the work
(Paul Klee, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*)

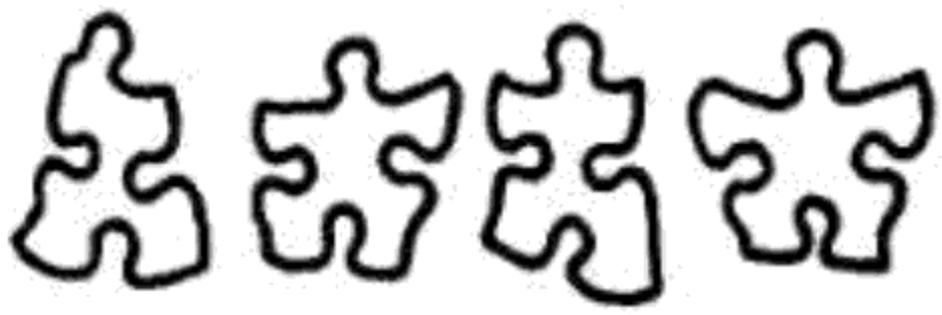
To begin with, the art of jigsaw puzzles seems of little substance, easily exhausted, wholly dealt with by a basic introduction to Gestalt: the perceived object – we may be dealing with a perceptual act, the acquisition of a skill, a physiological system, or, as in the present case, a wooden jigsaw puzzle – is not a sum of elements to be distinguished from each other and analysed discretely, but a pattern, that is to say a form, a structure: the element's existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts: knowledge of the pattern and of its laws, of the set and its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that compose it. That means that you can look at a piece of a puzzle for three whole days, you can believe that you know all there is to know about its colouring and shape, and be no further on than when you started. The only thing that counts is the ability to link this piece to other pieces, and in that sense the art of the jigsaw puzzle has something in common with the art of go. The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge. But as soon as you have succeeded, after minutes of trial and error, or after a prodigious half-second flash of inspiration, in fitting it into one of its neighbours, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece. The intense difficulty preceding this link-up – which the English word *puzzle* indicates so well – not only loses its *raison d'être*, it seems never to have had any reason, so obvious does the solution appear. The two pieces so miraculously conjoined are henceforth one, which in its turn will be a source of error, hesitation, dismay, and expectation.

The role of the puzzle-maker is hard to define. In most cases – and in particular in all cardboard jigsaws – the puzzles are machine-made, and the lines of cutting are entirely arbitrary: a blanking die, set up once and for all, cuts the sheets of

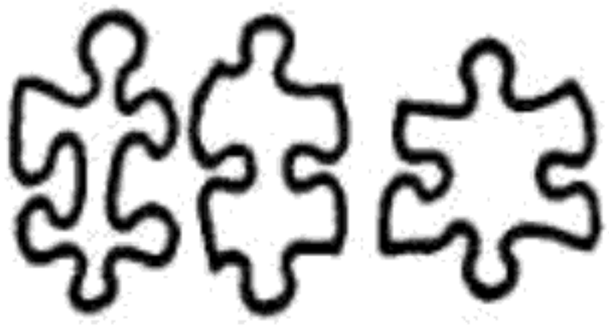
cardboard along identical lines every time. But such jigsaws are eschewed by the true puzzle-lover, not just because they are made of cardboard instead of wood, nor because the solutions are printed on the boxes they come in, but because this type of cut destroys the specific nature of jigsaw puzzles. Contrary to a widely and firmly held belief, it does not really matter whether the initial image is easy (or something taken to be easy – a genre scene in the style of Vermeer, for example, or a colour photograph of an Austrian castle) or difficult (a Jackson Pollock, a Pissarro, or the poor paradox of a blank puzzle). It's not the subject of the picture, or the painter's technique, which makes a puzzle more or less difficult, but the greater or lesser subtlety of the way it has been cut; and an arbitrary cutting pattern will necessarily produce an arbitrary degree of difficulty, ranging from the extreme of easiness – for edge pieces, patches of light, well-defined objects, lines, transitions – to the tiresome awkwardness of all the other pieces (cloudless skies, sand, meadow, ploughed land, shaded areas, etc.).

Pieces in a puzzle of this kind come in classes of which the best-known are

the little chaps



the double crosses



and the crossbars

and once the edges have been put together, the detail pieces put in place – the very light, almost whitish yellow fringe on the carpet on the table holding the lectern with an open book, the rich edging of the mirror, the lute, the woman's red dress – and the bulk of the background pieces parcelled out according to their shade of grey, brown, white, or sky blue, then solving the puzzle consists simply of trying all the plausible combinations one by one.

The art of jigsaw puzzling begins with wooden puzzles cut by hand, whose maker undertakes to ask himself all the questions the player will have to solve, and, instead of allowing chance to cover his tracks, aims to replace it with cunning, trickery, and subterfuge. All the elements occurring in the image to be reassembled – this armchair covered in gold brocade, that three-pointed black hat with its rather ruined black plume, or that silver-braided bright yellow livery – serve by design as points of departure for trails that lead to false information. The organised, coherent, structured signifying space of the picture is cut up not only into inert, formless elements containing little information or signifying power, but also into falsified elements, carrying false information; two fragments of cornice made to fit each other perfectly when they belong in fact to two quite separate sections of the ceiling, the belt buckle of a uniform which turns out *in extremis* to be a metal clasp holding the chandelier, several almost identically cut pieces belonging, for one part, to a dwarf orange tree placed on a mantelpiece and, for the other part, to its scarcely attenuated reflection in a mirror, are classic examples of the types of traps puzzle-lovers come across.

From this, one can make a deduction which is quite certainly the ultimate truth of jigsaw puzzles: despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other.

# PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

# *On the Stairs, I*

Yes, it could begin this way, right here, just like that, in a rather slow and ponderous way, in this neutral place that belongs to all and to none, where people pass by almost without seeing each other, where the life of the building regularly and distantly resounds. What happens behind the flats' heavy doors can most often be perceived only through those fragmented echoes, those splinters, remnants, shadows, those first moves or incidents or accidents that happen in what are called the "common areas", soft little sounds damped by the red woollen carpet, embryos of communal life which never go further than the landing. The inhabitants of a single building live a few inches from each other, they are separated by a mere partition wall, they share the same spaces repeated along each corridor, they perform the same movements at the same times, turning on a tap, flushing the water closet, switching on a light, laying the table, a few dozen simultaneous existences repeated from storey to storey, from building to building, from street to street. They entrench themselves in their domestic dwelling space – since that is what it is called – and they would prefer nothing to emerge from it; but the little that they do let out – the dog on a lead, the child off to fetch the bread, someone brought back, someone sent away – comes out by way of the landing. For all that passes, passes by the stairs, and all that comes, comes by the stairs: letters, announcements of births, marriages, and deaths, furniture brought in or taken out by removers, the doctor called in an emergency, the traveller returning from a long voyage. It's because of that that the staircase remains an anonymous, cold, and almost hostile place. In old buildings there used to be stone steps, wrought-iron handrails, sculptures, lamp-holders, sometimes a bench to allow old folk to rest between floors. In modern buildings there are lifts with walls covered in would-be obscene graffiti, and so-called "emergency" staircases in unrendered concrete, dirty and echoing. In this block of flats, where there is an old lift almost always out of order, the staircase is an old-fashioned place of questionable cleanliness, which declines

in terms of middle-class respectability as it rises from floor to floor: two thicknesses of carpet as far as the third floor, thereafter only one, and none at all for the two attic floors.

Yes, it will begin here: between the third and fourth storey at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier. A woman of about forty is climbing the stairs; she is wearing a long imitation-leather raincoat and on her head a kind of felt hat shaped like a sugar-loaf, something like what one imagines a goblin's hat to be, divided into red and grey squares. A big dun canvas hold-all, a case of the sort commonly called overnight bags, hangs on her right shoulder. A small cambric handkerchief is knotted through one of the chromed metal rings which attach the bag to its strap. Three motifs, which look as if they had been printed with a stencil, are regularly repeated over the whole fabric of the bag: a large pendulum clock, a round loaf cut through the middle, and a kind of copper receptacle without handles.

The woman is looking at a plan held in her left hand. It's just a sheet of paper, whose still visible creases attest to its having been folded in four, fixed by a paperclip to a thick cyclostyled volume – the terms of co-ownership relating to the flat this woman is about to visit. On the sheet there are in fact not one but three sketch-plans: the first, at the top right-hand corner, shows where the building is, roughly halfway along Rue Simon-Crubellier, which cuts at an angle across the quadrilateral formed by Rue Médéric, Rue Jadin, Rue de Chazelles, and Rue Léon Jost, in the Plaine Monceau district of the XVIIth *arrondissement* of Paris; the second, at the top left-hand corner, is a vertical cross-section of the building giving a diagrammatic picture of the layout of the flats and the names of some of the residents: Madame Nochère, concierge; Madame de Beaumont, second floor right; Bartlebooth, third floor left; Rémi Rorschach, television producer, fourth floor left; Dr Dinteville, sixth floor left, as well as the empty flat, sixth floor right, occupied by Gaspard Winckler, craftsman, until his death; the third plan, in the lower half of the sheet, is of Winckler's flat: three rooms facing the street, kitchen and bathroom on the courtyard side, and a boxroom without natural light.

The woman carries in her right hand a bulky set of keys, no doubt the keys of all the flats she has inspected that day; some are fixed to novelty key-rings: a miniature bottle of Marie Brizard *apéritif*, a golf

tee and a wasp, a double-six domino, and a plastic octagonal token in which is set a tuberose flower.

It is almost two years since Gaspard Winckler died. He had no child. He was not known to have any surviving family. Bartlebooth entrusted a notary with the task of finding any heirs he might have. His only sister, Madame Anne Voltimand, died in 1942. His nephew, Grégoire Voltimand, had been killed on the Garigliano in May 1944, at the breakthrough on the Gustav line. The notary took many months to unearth a third cousin of Winckler's called Antoine Rameau, who worked for a manufacturer of knockdown divans. The taxes on the inheritance, added to the legal costs of the search for heirs, turned out to be so high that Antoine Rameau had to auction off everything. It is already a few months since the furniture was dispersed at the Sale Rooms, and a few weeks since the flat was bought by a property agency.

The woman climbing the stairs is not the director of the property agency, but his assistant; she doesn't deal with the commercial side, nor with customer relations, but only with the technical problems. From the property angle, the deal is a good one, the area is decent, the façade is of ashlar, the staircase is OK despite the agedness of the lift, and the woman is now coming to inspect in greater detail the condition of the flat itself, to draw up a more detailed plan of the accommodation with, for instance, thicker lines to distinguish structural walls from partitions and arrowheaded semicircles to show which way the doors open, and to decide on the work needed, to make a preliminary costing for complete refurbishment: the partition wall between the toilet and the boxroom to be knocked down, allowing the installation of a bathroom with a slipper-bath and WC; the kitchen tiles to be renewed; a wall-mounted gas-fired boiler (giving both central heating and hot water) to replace the old coal-fired boiler; the woodblock floor with its zigzag moulding to be lifted and replaced by a layer of cement, a felt underlay, and a fitted carpet.

Not much is left of these three small rooms in which Gaspard Winckler lived and worked for nearly forty years. His few pieces of furniture, his small workbench, his jigsaw, his minute files have

gone. On the bedroom wall, opposite his bed, beside the window, that square picture he loved so much is no longer: it showed an antechamber with three men in it. Two were standing, pale and fat, dressed in frock-coats and wearing top hats which seemed screwed to their heads. The third, similarly dressed in black, was sitting by the door in the attitude of a man expecting visitors, slowing putting a pair of tight-fitting new gloves on over his fingers.

The woman is going up the stairs. Soon, the old flat will become a charming pied-à-terre, two recept. + bedr., all mod. cons., open outlook, quiet. Gaspard Winckler is dead, but the long and meticulous, patiently laid plot of his revenge is not finished yet.

## CHAPTER TWO

## *Beaumont, I*

Madame de Beaumont's drawing room is almost entirely filled by a concert grand, on the stand of which sits the closed score of a famous American melody, *Gertrude of Wyoming*, by Arthur Stanley Jefferson. An old man with his head covered with an orange nylon scarf sits in front of the piano, preparing to tune it.

In the left-hand corner of the room there is a large modern armchair made of a huge hemisphere of steel-ringed Plexiglass on a chromed metal base. Beside it an octagonal block of marble serves as a low table; a steel cigarette lighter stands on it, as does a cylindrical pot-holder from which there emerges a dwarf oak tree, one of those Japanese bonsai plants whose growth has been so controlled, arrested, and altered that they show all the symptoms of maturity and even of old age almost without having grown at all, and about which growers say that their perfection depends less on the material care given to them than on the concentrated quality of meditation devoted to them.

Lying directly on the light-coloured woodblock floor, slightly to the front of the armchair, is a wooden jigsaw puzzle of which virtually all the edges have been assembled. In the lower right-hand

third of the jigsaw some additional pieces have been put in place: they depict the oval face of a sleeping girl, whose blonde hair is wound in plaits around her head and held over her forehead by a double band of plaited cloth; she leans her cheek on her cupped right hand as if in her dream she were listening to something.

To the left of the puzzle, a decorated tray carries a coffee jug, a cup and saucer, and a silver-plated sugarbowl. The scene painted on the tray is partly masked by these objects, but two details can be made out nonetheless: on the right, a boy in embroidered trousers leans over a river bank; in the centre, a carp out of water twists on a line; the fisherman and the other characters remain invisible.

In front of the puzzle and the tray, several books, exercise books, and folders are spread out on the floor. The title of one of them is visible: *Safety Regulations in Mines and Quarries.* One of the folders is open at a page partly covered with equations written out in a small, fine hand:

If $f \in$ Hom $(\upsilon, \mu)$ (resp. $g \in$ Hom $(\xi, \upsilon)$) is a homogeneous morphism whose degree is the matrix $\alpha$ (resp. $\beta$), $fog$ is homogeneous and its degree is the product matrix $\alpha\beta$.

Let $\alpha = (\alpha_{ij})$, $1 \leqslant i \leqslant m$, $1 \leqslant j \leqslant n$ and $\beta = (\beta_{kl})$, $1 \leqslant k \leqslant n$, $1 \leqslant l \leqslant p$ ($|\xi| = p$) be the given matrices. Suppose that $f = (f_1, \ldots, f_m)$, $g = (g_1, \ldots, g_n)$, and let $h : \pi \to \xi$ be a morphism, $h = (h_1, \ldots, h_p)$. Finally let $a = (a_1, \ldots, a_p)$ be an element of $A^p$. For each index i between 1 and m ($|\mu| = m$) we compute the morphism

$$x_i = f_i o g \circ (a_1 h_1, \ldots, a_p h_p).$$

First we get

$$x_i = f_i o (a_1^{\beta_{11}} \ldots . a_p^{\beta_{1p}} g_1, \ldots, a_1^{\beta_{n1}} \ldots . a_p^{\beta_{np}} g_i$$

then

$$x_i = a_1^{\alpha_{i1}\beta_{11}+\ldots+\alpha_{ij}\beta_{j1}+\ldots+\alpha_{in}\beta_{n1}} \ldots . a_j^{\alpha_{i1}\beta_{ij}\ldots+\alpha_{in}\beta_{nj}} . a_p^{\alpha_{i1}\beta_{1p}+\ldots.}$$

$f_i o g o h$.

Thus $fog$ satisfies the homogeneity condition of degree $\alpha\beta$([1.2.2]).

* * *

The room's walls are painted in white gloss. Several framed posters are hanging on them. One of them depicts four greedy-looking monks sitting at table around a Camembert cheese on the label of which four greedy-looking monks – the very same – are again at table around, etc. The scene is repeated distinctly four times over.

Fernand de Beaumont was an archaeologist as ambitious as Schliemann. He tried to find the traces of the legendary city called Lebtit by the Arabs and which was supposed to have been their capital in Spain. Nobody disputed the existence of such a city, but most specialists, be they Arabists or Hispanists, agreed that it should be identified either as Ceuta, on African territory opposite Gibraltar, or as Jaén, in Andalusia, at the foot of the Sierra de Magina. Beaumont wouldn't agree to these identifications, on the grounds that none of the excavations made at Ceuta and at Jaén had displayed some of the features attributed to Lebtit by the literature. Stories told in particular of a strong castle "with leafed gates meant neither for going in nor for going out but only to be kept locked. Whenever a king died and another took the high throne after him, he set with his own hands a new lock to the gate, until these locks numbered twenty-four – one for each of the kings." There were seven rooms in the castle. The seventh was "so long that the ablest archer shooting from the threshold could not get his arrow to fix in the end wall". In the first, there were "perfect figures" representing Arabs "mounted on their swift horses and camels, with turbans hanging down their shoulders and scimitars dangling from their belts and bearing long lances in their right hands".

Beaumont belonged to that school of medievalists which described itself as "materialist" and which prompted a professor of the history of religion, for example, to go through the accounts of the Vatican chancery with the sole aim of proving that in the first half of the twelfth century the consumption of parchment, lead, and sigillary ribbon so far exceeded the amount justified by the number of officially declared and registered bulls that even allowing for possible meltings and probable muddles one had to conclude that a relatively large number of bulls (and we are talking about bulls, not briefs, since only bulls were sealed with lead, briefs being sealed with wax) had been kept confidential if not

clandestine. Whence the thesis, justly famous in its time, on *Secret Bulls and the Question of the Antipopes*, which shed new light on the relations between Innocent II, Anaclete II, and Victor IV.

In a roughly similar manner Beaumont showed that if you took as a yardstick not Sultan Selim's 1798 world record of 888 metres but the good though not outstanding performance of the English bowmen at Crécy, the seventh room in the castle at Lebtit could not have been less than two hundred yards long and, taking account of the angle of projection, could scarcely have had less than thirty yards' ceiling height. Neither the excavations at Ceuta nor those at Jaén nor any others had uncovered a room of the requisite dimensions, which allowed Beaumont to state that "if the legend of this city has its origins in some real fortress, then it is not any one of those whose remains we know of to date".

Beyond this purely negative argument, another fragment of the legend of Lebtit seemed destined to give Beaumont a hint of the citadel's site. On the unreachable end wall of the archers' room, so the legend went, the following sentence was carved: "If ever a King opens the door of this castle, his warriors will turn to stone like the warriors of the first room, and his enemies shall lay his kingdom to waste". Beaumont saw this metaphor as a translation of the upheavals which shook the *Reyes de taifas* and provoked the *Reconquista*. More exactly, in his view, the legend of Lebtit described what he called the "Cantabrian débâcle of the Moors", that is to say, the battle of Covadonga in the course of which Pelage defeated the emir Alkhamah before having himself crowned King of Asturias on the battlefield. And with an enthusiasm that brought him the admiration of even his sharpest critics, Fernand de Beaumont decided that it was at Oviedo, in the heart of the Asturias, where the remains of the legendary fortress were to be found.

The origins of Oviedo were obscure. Some believed it was a monastery built by two monks to escape from the Moors; others saw it as a Visigoth citadel; still others held it to be a Hispano-Roman oppidum sometimes called Lucus asturum, sometimes Ovetum; and finally there were those who said that it was Pelage himself (called Don Pelayo by the Spaniards, who believed him to have been King Rodriguez's old lance-bearer at Jerez, and Belaï al-Roumi by the

Arabs since he was supposed to be of Roman extraction) who had founded the city. So many contradictory hypotheses served to support Beaumont's argument: he took Oviedo to be the fabled Lebtit, the most northerly of the Moorish strongholds in Spain and by that token the symbol of their domination over the peninsula. Its loss would have signalled the end of Islamic hegemony over Western Europe, and it would have been to assert this defeat that the victorious Pelage settled there.

Excavations began in 1930 and lasted more than five years. In the final year Beaumont was visited by Bartlebooth, who had come to nearby Gijon, also an ancient capital of the Asturian kings, to paint the first of his seascapes.

A few months later, Beaumont returned to France. He drew up a 78-page technical report on the conduct of the excavations, in which, in particular, he proposed a system for exploiting the results based on the Dewey Decimal Classification, and which is still regarded as a model of its kind. Then, on 12 November 1935, he committed suicide.

## CHAPTER THREE

# *Third Floor Right, 1*

This will be a drawing room, almost bare, with polished floorboards. The walls will be covered with metal panels.

Four men squat in the middle of the room, virtually sitting on their heels, with knees wide apart, elbows resting on knees, their hands together with middle fingers hooked and the other fingers stretched out. Three of the men will be in a row, facing the fourth. All will be bare-chested and barefoot, wearing only black silk trousers printed with a repeated design representing an elephant. A metal ring set with a circular obsidian will be worn by each on the ring finger of the right hand.

* * *

The room's only furniture is a Louis XIII armchair with whorled legs and studded leather arms and back. A long black sock is hooked over one of the arms.

The man facing the others is Japanese. His name is Ashikage Yoshimitsu. He belongs to a sect founded in 1960 in Manila by a deep-sea fisherman, a post-office employee, and a butcher's mate. The Japanese name of the sect is "Shira Nami", which means "The White Wave"; in French it is called "Les Trois Hommes Libres", or "The Three Free Men".

In the three years following the founding of the sect, each of these "three free men" managed to convert three others. The nine men of the second generation initiated twenty-seven over the next three years. The sixth level, in 1975, numbered seven hundred and twenty-nine members, including Ashikage Yoshimitsu, who was given the task, along with some other members, of spreading the new faith in the West. Initiation into the sect of The Three Free Men is long, hard, and very expensive, but it does not seem that Yoshimitsu had much difficulty in finding three converts rich enough to set aside the time and the money obligatorily required for such an enterprise.

The novices are at the very first stage of initiation and have to overcome preliminary trials in which they must absorb themselves in the contemplation of a perfectly trivial mental or material object to such a degree as to become oblivious to all feeling, even to extreme pain: to this end, the squatting tyros' heels are not resting directly on the floor, but on large metal dice with particularly sharp edges held in balance with one side touching the floor and the opposite side touching the heel: the slightest tautening of the foot makes the dice tumble instantly, causing the prompt and irreversible expulsion not only of the inadequate pupil but also of his two companions; the slightest relaxation of the position causes the edge of the dice to cut into the flesh, with an ensuing pain which quickly becomes unbearable. The three men have to stay in this disagreeable position for six hours; two minutes' break is allowed every three quarters of an hour, but recourse to this concession more than three times per session is frowned upon.

As for the object of meditation, each has a different one. The first novice, who has the exclusive sales rights in France for the products of a Swedish manufacturer of hanging files, has to solve a puzzle

presented to him in the form of a small square of white card on which the following question has been finely handwritten in violet ink:

*Who loved to eat her fill alongside Aymon?*

above which a bow has been drawn around the figure 6.

The second pupil is German, the owner of a baby-wear factory in Stuttgart. He has in front of him, placed on a steel cube, a piece of flotsam of a shape quite closely resembling a ginseng root.

The third – who is French, and a star singer – faces a voluminous treatise on the culinary arts, the sort of book that usually goes on sale in the Christmas season. The book is placed on a music stand. It is open at an illustration of a reception given in 1890 by Lord Radnor in the drawing rooms of Longford Castle.

Printed on the left-hand page in a frame of *art-nouveau* colophons and garland decorations is a recipe for

STRAWBERRY CREAM

Take 100z. wild or cultivated strawberries.
Strain through a fine sieve. Mix in 30z. icing sugar.
Whip 1pt cream until very firm and blend in the mixture.
Spoon the mixture from the bowl into small round paper cups,
and cool for two hours in a cellar that is not too cold.
To serve, place a large strawberry in each cup.

Yoshimitsu himself is sitting on his heels, but without the encumbrance of dice. Between the palms of his hands he holds a small bottle of orange juice. From it a straw sticks out, connected to several other straws in a line, in such a way as to reach as far as his mouth.

Smautf has calculated that in 1978 there would be two thousand one hundred and eighty-seven new members of the sect of The Three Free Men, and, assuming none of the older disciples dies, a total of three thousand two hundred and eighty-seven keepers of the faith. Then things would go much faster: by 2017, the nineteenth generation would run to more than a thousand million people. In 2020, the entire planet, and well beyond, would have been converted.

Nobody lives on the third floor right. The owner is a certain Monsieur Fourcau, who is said to live on an estate at Chavignolles, between Caen and Falaise, in a farm of thirty-eight hectares, with a sort of manor house. Some years ago, a television drama was filmed there, under the title *The Sixteenth Edge of This Cube*; Rémi Rorschach took part in the shooting but never met this owner.

Nobody ever seems to have seen him. There is no name on the door on the landing, nor on the list fixed on the glass pane of the concierge's office door. The blinds are always drawn.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# *Marquiseaux, I*

An empty drawing room on the fourth floor right.

On the floor there is a woven sisal mat, its strands entwined in such a way as to form star-shaped designs.

On the wall, an imitation of Jouy cretonne wallpaper depicts big sailing ships, Portuguese four-masters, armed with cannon and

culverins, making ready to put into a harbour; the main jibs and spanker sails billow in the wind; sailors have climbed up the ropes to clew the others.

There are four paintings on the wall.

The first is a still life that despite its modern manner is strongly reminiscent of those compositions constructed on the theme of the five senses which were so common throughout Europe from the end of the Renaissance to the eighteenth century: on a table, there is an ashtray with a lighted Havana, a book of which the title and subtitle can be seen – *The Unfinished Symphony: A Novel* – though the name of the author is hidden, a bottle of rum, a cup-and-ball, and, in a shallow bowl, a pile of dried fruit, walnuts, almonds, apricot halves, prunes, etc.

The second depicts a street on the edge of a city, at night, alongside wasteland. To the right, a metal pylon with crossbars supporting at each point of intersection a large, lighted electric lamp. To the left, a constellation of stars reproduces precisely the inverse image of the pylon (base in the sky, apex towards the ground). The sky is covered in a flower pattern (dark blue on a lighter background) identical to the shapes made by frost on glass.

The third is of a legendary beast, the tarand, first described by Gelon the Sarmatian:

> A tarand is an animal as big as a bullock, having a head like a stag, or a little bigger, two stately horns with large branches, cloven feet, hair long like that of a furred Muscovite, I mean a bear, and a skin almost as hard as steel armour. The Scythian said that there are but few tarands to be found in Scythia, because it varieth its colour according to the diversity of the places where it grazes and abides, and represents the colour of the grass, plants, trees, shrubs, flowers, meadows, rocks, and generally of all things near which it comes. It hath this in common with the sea-pulp, or polypus, with the thoes, with the wolves of India, and with the chameleon; which is a kind of lizard so wonderful, that Democritus hath written a whole book of its figure, and anatomy, as also of its virtue and property in magic. This I can confirm, that I have seen it change its colour, not only at the approach of things that have a colour, but by its own voluntary impulse, according to its fear or other affections: as for example, upon a green carpet, I have certainly seen it become green; but

having remained there some time, it turned yellow, blue, tanned and purple, in course, in the same manner as you see a turkey-cock's comb change colour according to its passions. But what we find most surprising in this tarand is, that not only its face and skin, but also its hair could take whatever colour was about it.

The fourth picture is a black-and-white reproduction of a painting by Forbes called *A Rat Behind the Arras*. This painting was inspired by a true story which took place at Newcastle-upon-Tyne during the winter of 1858.

Old Lady Forthright had a collection of watches and clockwork toys of which she was very proud; the jewel in this crown was a minute watch set in a fragile alabaster egg. She had entrusted the keeping of her collection to her oldest servant. He was a coachman who had been in her service for more than sixty years and who had been madly in love with her ever since he had first had the privilege of driving her. He had transferred his silent passion to his mistress's collection, and, since he was particularly clever with his hands, he maintained it with ferocious care, and spent his days and his nights keeping these delicate mechanisms in good order, or restoring them, for some of the pieces were more than two centuries old.

The finest items of the collection were kept in a small room used only for that purpose. Some were locked away in glass-fronted cases, but most were hung on the wall and protected from dust by a thin muslin curtain. The coachman slept in an adjacent boxroom because a few months previously a solitary scientist had settled not far from the castle, in a laboratory where, like Martin Magron and Vella in Turin, he was studying the contradictory effects of strychnine and curare on rats: whereas the old lady and her coachman were convinced that he was a brigand drawn to the area by greed alone and was plotting some diabolical stratagem for getting hold of these precious jewels.

One night the old coachman was woken by tiny mewings that seemed to come from the collection room. He imagined that the demon scientist had trained one of his rats and taught it to fetch the watches. He got up, took a hammer from the toolbag he never let out of his sight, went into the room, approached the curtain as silently as he could, and hit hard at the place where the noise seemed

to be coming from. Alas, it was not a rat, but only that magnificent watch set in its alabaster egg; its works had got a little out of adjustment, and had given it an almost imperceptible squeak. Lady Forthright, woken in a start by the hammer-blow, ran thereupon to the room, where she found the old servant dumbfounded, open-mouthed, holding in one hand the hammer and in the other the broken jewel. Without giving him time to explain what had happened, she called her other servants and had her coachman locked away as a raving lunatic. She died two years later. The old coachman learnt of her death, managed to escape from his far-distant asylum, returned to the castle, and hanged himself in the very room where the drama had taken place.

In this early work over which the influence of Bonnat still hangs heavily, Forbes has made very free use of the original story. He shows the room with its clock-covered walls. The old coachman is dressed in a uniform of white leather; he has climbed onto an elaborately shaped, dark-red lacquered Chinese chair. He is hanging a long silk scarf onto one of the ceiling rafters. Old Lady Forthright stands at the doorway; she is looking at her servant with an expression of great anger; in her right hand she is holding, with outstretched arm, a silver chain at the end of which hangs a shard of the alabaster egg.

There are several collectors in this building, and they are often more maniacal than the characters in the painting. Valène himself kept the postcards Smautf sent him from each place they stopped off at. He had one such from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in fact, and another from the Australian Newcastle, in New South Wales.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## *Foulerot, 1*

On the fifth floor, right-hand side, right at the end: right below where Gaspard Winckler had his workroom. Valène remembered the parcels he received every fortnight for twenty years: even

at the height of war they had kept coming regularly, and every one identical, absolutely identical; obviously, the postage stamps varied, allowing the concierge, who wasn't yet Madame Nochère, but Madame Claveau, to ask if she could have them for her son Michel; but apart from the stamps there was nothing to distinguish one parcel from another: it was the same kraft paper, the same string, the same wax seal, the same address label; it made you think that before leaving, Bartlebooth must have asked Smautf to work out in advance how much tissue paper, kraft paper, string, and sealing wax would be needed for all five hundred parcels! He probably hadn't needed to ask, Smautf would have understood without prompting! It's not as if they had been short of trunks.

Here, on the fifth floor right, the room is empty. It is a bathroom, painted a dull orange colour. On the rim of the bath, a large oyster shell lined with mother-of-pearl – for it had once contained a pearl – now holds a piece of soap and a pumice stone. Above the washbasin there is an octagonal mirror in a veined marble surround. Between the bath and the basin, a Scottish cashmere cardigan and a skirt with braces have been thrown onto a folding chair.

The door at the end is open and gives onto a long corridor. A girl of barely eighteen comes towards the bathroom. She is naked. In her right hand she holds an egg, which she will use for washing her hair, and in her left hand she carries issue No. 40 of *Les Lettres Nouvelles* (July–August 1956), a review containing, alongside a note by Jacques Lederer on *Le Journal d'un prêtre* by Paul Jury (Gallimard), a short story by Luigi Pirandello, dating from 1913, entitled *In the Abyss*, and telling the tale of how Romeo Daddi went mad.

## CHAPTER SIX

# *Servants' Quarters, 1*

It's a maid's room on the seventh floor, to the left of the one right at the end of the corridor where the old painter Valène lives. The room is attached to the large flat on the second floor right, the one where Madame de Beaumont, the archaeologist's widow, lives with

her two granddaughters, Anne and Béatrice Breidel. Béatrice, the younger, is seventeen. A clever child, outstanding at school, she is studying for the entrance examination to the girls' section of the Ecole Normale Supérieure at Sèvres. She has obtained the permission of her strict grandmother to use this independent room to study, but not to live in.

There are hexagonal red tiles on the floor, and the walls are papered with a design depicting various shrubs. Despite the tiny size of the flatlet, Béatrice has invited five of her classmates in. She is seated at her work-desk on a high-backed chair, which stands on feet carved in the shape of sheep bones. She is wearing a skirt with braces and a red top with slightly puffed cuffs; on her right wrist she wears a silver bangle and holds between the thumb and index finger of her left hand a long cigarette, which she is watching burn away.

One of her friends, dressed in a long white linen coat, is standing by the door and seems to be carefully studying a map of the Paris underground. The other four, uniformly dressed in jeans and striped shirts, are seated on the floor, around a tea-set on a tray, placed beside a lamp of which the base is a small barrel, of the sort Saint Bernard dogs are generally supposed to carry. One of the girls pours tea. Another opens a box of cheese packed in small cubes. The third is reading a novel by Thomas Hardy, on the cover of which can be seen a bearded character sitting in a rowing boat in the middle of a stream and fishing with rod and line, whilst on the bank a knight in armour appears to be hailing him. The fourth, with an air of profound indifference, is looking at an engraving depicting a bishop leaning over a table on which you can see one of those games called *solitaire*. It is made of a wooden board, trapezoidal in shape, much like a racket-press, in which twenty-five holes have been drilled so as to form a lozenge, deep enough to take the pieces which are in this case good-sized pearls, placed to the right of the board on a little black silk cushion. The engraving, which manifestly copies the famous painting by Bosch known as *The Conjuror*, in the Municipal Gallery at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, has a humorous – though not, apparently, very illuminating – title, handwritten in Gothic lettering:

**He that with his soup will drink**
**When he is dead shall see no wink**

church, and even a walk-on in one of the first Laurel and Hardy shorts – Morellet, at the age of twenty-nine, had become a technician in the chemistry lab at the Ecole Polytechnique, and would no doubt have remained so until retirement if, like so many others', his path had not been crossed one day by Bartlebooth.

When he returned from his travels, in December nineteen fifty-four, Bartlebooth sought a process which would allow him, once he had reassembled his puzzles, to recover the original seascapes; to do that, first the pieces of wood would need to be stuck back together, then a means of eliminating all the traces of the cutting lines would have to be found, as well as a way of restoring the original surface texture of the paper. If the two glued layers were then separated with a razor, the watercolour would be returned intact, just as it had been on the day, twenty years before, when Bartlebooth had painted it. It was a difficult problem, for though there were on the market even in those days various resins and synthetic glazes used by toyshops for puzzles in window displays, they left the cutting lines far too visible.

As was his custom, Bartlebooth wanted the person who would help him in this search to live in the same building, or as near as possible. That is how, through his faithful Smautf, whose room was on the same floor as the lab technician's, he met Morellet. Morellet had none of the theoretical knowledge required to solve such a problem, but he referred Bartlebooth to his head of department, a chemist of German origin named Kusser, who claimed to be a distant descendant of the composer.

> KUSSER or COUSSER (Johann Sigismond), German composer of Hungarian extraction (Pozsony, 1660–Dublin, 1727). He collaborated with Lully during his stay in France (1674–1682). Music-master at various princely courts in Germany, conductor in Hamburg, where he wrote and performed several operas: *Erindo* (1693), *Porus* (1694), *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1694), *Scipio Africanus* (1695), *Jason* (1697). In 1710 he was appointed master of music at Dublin Cathedral and remained there until his death. He was one of the founders of the Hamburg opera, where he introduced the "French overture", and was a precursor of Handel in the field of oratorio. Six of his overtures and various other compositions have survived.

After many fruitless trials using all kinds of animal and vegetable glues and various synthetic acrylics, Kusser tackled the problem from a different angle. Grasping that he had to find a substance capable of bonding the fibres of the paper without affecting the coloured pigmentation which it supported, he fortunately recalled a technique he had seen used, in his youth, by certain Italian medal makers: they would coat the inside of the die with a very fine layer of powdered alabaster, which allowed them to strike almost perfectly smooth coins and eliminated virtually all trimming and finishing work. In pursuing this line of research, Kusser discovered a type of gypsum that turned out to be satisfactory. Reduced to an almost impalpably fine powder and mixed with a gelatinous colloid, injected at a given temperature under high pressure through a microsyringe which could be manipulated in such a way as to follow precisely the complex shapes of the cutting lines Winckler had originally made, the gypsum reagglutinated the threads of the paper and restored its prior structure. The fine powder became perfectly translucid as it cooled and had no visible effect on the colour of the painting.

The process was simple and required only patience and care. Appropriate instruments were specially built and installed in Morellet's room; handsomely remunerated by Bartlebooth, Morellet let his job at the Ecole Polytechnique slip more and more, and he devoted himself to the wealthy amateur.

In truth, Morellet didn't have much to do. Every fortnight Smautf brought him up the puzzle which, despite its difficulty, Bartlebooth had, once again, succeeded in reassembling. Morellet inserted it into a metal frame and put it under a special press which gave an imprint of the cutting lines. With this imprint he used an electrolytic process to make an open-work stencil, a piece of rigid, fantastical metal lace which faithfully reproduced all the delineations of the puzzle on which this matrix was then delicately and accurately overlaid. After preparing his gypsum suspension and heating it to the required temperature, Morellet filled his microsyringe and fixed it on an articulated arm so that the needle-point, no more than a few microns thick, was located precisely above the open lines of the stencil. The remainder of the operation was automatic, since the ejection of the gypsum and the movement of the syringe were

controlled by an electronic device using an X-Y table, giving a slow but even deposit of the substance.

The last part of the operation did not concern the lab technician: the puzzle, rebonded into a watercolour stuck to a thin sheet of poplar, was taken to the restorer Guyomard, who detached the sheet of Whatman paper by means of a blade and disposed of all traces of glue on the reverse side, two tricky but routine operations for this expert who had made his name famous by lifting frescoes covered by several layers of plaster and paint, and by cutting in half, through its thickness, a sheet of paper on which Hans Bellmer had drawn on recto and verso sides.

All in all, what Morellet had to do, once a fortnight, was simply to make ready and supervise a series of manipulations which, including cleaning and tidying away, took a little less than a day.

This enforced idleness had unhappy consequences. Relieved of all financial cares, but bitten by the research bug, Morellet took advantage of his free time to devote himself, in his flat, to the sort of physical and chemical experiments of which his long years as a technician seemed to have left him particularly frustrated.

In all the local cafés he gave out his visiting card, which described him as "Head of Practical Services at the Ecole Pyrotechnique", and he offered his services generously; he obtained innumerable orders for superactive hair and carpet shampoos, stain-removers, energy-saving devices, cigarette filters, martingales for 421, cough potions, and other miracle products.

One evening in February 1960, whilst he was heating a pressure cooker full of a mixture of rosin and diterpene carbide destined to produce a lemon-flavoured toothpaste, the apparatus exploded. Morellet's left hand was torn to shreds, and he lost three fingers.

This accident cost him his job – preparing the metal grid required some minimal dexterity – and all he had to live on was a part-pension meanly paid by the Ecole Polytechnique, and a small pension from Bartlebooth. But his vocation for research did not abate; on the contrary, it grew sharper. Though severely lectured by Smautf, by Winckler, and by Valène, he persevered with experiments which turned out for the most part to be ineffective, but harmless, save for a certain Madame Schwann who lost all her hair after washing it in the special dye Morellet had made for her exclusive use; two or three

times, though, these manipulations ended in explosions, more spectacular than dangerous, and in minor fires which were quickly brought under control.

These incidents filled two people with glee: his neighbours on the right, the Plassaert couple, young traders in printed cotton goods, who had ingeniously converted three maids' rooms into a pied-à-terre (in so far as a dwelling situated right under the eaves may be referred to as a foot on the ground), and who were reckoning on Morellet's room for further expansion. After each explosion they made a complaint, and took a petition around the building demanding the eviction of the former technician. The room belonged to the building manager, who, when the property had gone into co-ownership, had bought up almost all of the two top floors in his own name. For several years, the manager held back from putting the old man out on the street, for he had many friends in the building – to begin with, Madame Nochère herself, who regarded Monsieur Morellet as a true scientist, a brain, a possessor of secrets, and who had a personal stake in the little disasters which now and again struck the top floor of the building, not so much because of the tips she sometimes got on these occasions as for the epical, sentimental, and mysterious accounts she could give of them to the whole *quartier*.

Then, a few months ago, there were two accidents in the same week. The first cut off the lights in the building for a few minutes; the second broke six windowpanes. But the Plassaerts won their case this time, and Morellet was locked away.

In the painting the room is as it is today; the printed-cotton trader has bought it from the manager and has started to have work done on it. On the walls there is a dull, old-fashioned light-chestnut paint, and on the floor a coconut-fibre carpet worn down almost everywhere to the backing. The neighbour has already put two pieces of furniture in place: a low table, made of a pane of smoked glass set on a polyhedron of hexagonal cross-section, and a Renaissance chest. Placed on the table is a box of Münster, the lid of which depicts a unicorn, an almost empty sachet of caraway seeds, and a knife.

Three workmen are now leaving the room. They have already begun the work needed to unite the two dwellings. They have stuck on the bottom wall, by the door, a large tracing-paper plan showing

the intended location of the radiator, the routing of the pipework and electrical wires, and the section of partition wall to be knocked down.

One of the workmen is wearing big gloves like those used by electrical cable-layers. The second has an embroidered suede waistcoat with fringes. The third is reading a letter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# *Winckler, I*

Now we are in the room Gaspard Winckler called the lounge. Of the three rooms in his flat, it is the one nearest the stairs, the furthest to the left from where we are standing.

It is a rather small, almost square room whose door gives straight onto the landing. The walls are covered in hessian, once blue, now returned to an almost colourless condition except in the places where the furniture and the pictures have protected it from the light.

There weren't many pieces of furniture in the lounge. It's a room which Winckler didn't live in very much. He worked all day in the third room, the one where he had set up his equipment. He didn't eat at home anymore; he had never learnt to cook and hated it. Since 1943, he preferred to take even his breakfast at Riri's, the bar on the corner of Rue Jadin and Rue de Chazelles. It's only when he had guests whom he didn't know very well that he entertained them in his lounge. He had a round table with extension flaps that he couldn't have used very often, six straw-seated chairs, and a chest that he had carved himself with designs illustrating the principal scenes of *The Mysterious Island*: the landing of the balloon that had got away from Richmond, the miraculous finding of Cyrus Smith, the last match rescued from Gedeon Spilett's waistcoat pocket, the discovery of the trunk, down to Ayrton's and Nemo's heartrending confessions, which end these adventures and connect them magnificently to *The Children of Captain Grant* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*. It took a long time to see this chest, to really see it. From a distance it looked like any old rustic-

It was not until later that he started to make rings: he took small stones – agate, cornelian, Ptyxes, Rhine pebbles, sunstones – and mounted them on delicate rings made of minutely plaited silver threads. One day he explained to Valène that they were also a kind of puzzle, one of the most difficult there is: in Turkey they are called "Devil's Rings": they are made of seven, or eleven, or seventeen gold or silver circles chain-linked to each other, and whose complex interweaving produces a closed, compact, and perfectly regular coil. In the cafés of Ankara, streetsellers accost foreigners, and show them the ring assembled, and then flick the linked coils apart; they usually have a simplified design with only five circles that they entwine in a few invisible moves and then open out again, leaving the tourist to struggle in vain with it for a few long moments until an associate – most often one of the café waiters – agrees to fit the ring together with a few careless turns of his hand or gives away the knack, something like once over, once under, then turn it all inside out when there's only one coil left disengaged.

What was admirable in Winckler's rings was that the coil, once entwined, although perfectly regular, left a minute circular space in which was set a semi-precious stone; once inserted and tightened with two minute tweaks of a pincer, it closed the ring for ever. "It's only for me," he said one day to Valène, "that they're diabolical. Bartlebooth himself would approve." It was the only time Valène heard Winckler utter the Englishman's name.

He took ten years to make five score of the rings. Each required several weeks' work. To begin with, he tried to sell them through local jewellers. Then he began to lose interest in them; he gave some on sale or return to the cosmeticist's shop; he lent some others to Madame Marcia, the antique dealer whose shop and flat were on the ground floor of the building. Then he began to give them away. He gave some to Madame Riri and her daughters, to Madame Nochère, to Martine, to Madame Orlowska and her two neighbours, to the two Breidel girls, to Caroline Echard, to Isabelle Gratiolet and to Véronique Altamont, and even, in the end, to people who didn't live in the building and whom he hardly knew.

Some time later he found at the flea market at Saint-Ouen a set of small convex mirrors and he began to make what are called "witches' mirrors" by inserting them into infinitely crafted wooden mouldings.

He was prodigiously clever with his hands and kept all his life quite exceptional gifts of accuracy, control, and eye, but it seems that from that time on he didn't want to work very much at all. He finicked over each frame for days on end, cutting, fretsawing endlessly away until it was an almost immaterial piece of wooden lace in whose centre the small polished mirror looked like a metallic glance, an icy eye, wide open, full of irony and malice. The contrast between the unreal corona, as elaborate as a Gothic stained-glass window, and the harsh grey light of the mirror created a feeling of unease, as if this quantitatively and qualitatively disproportionate surround was only there to emphasise the maleficent power of convexity which seemed to want to concentrate all available space into a single point. The people he showed them to didn't like them. They would pick one up, turn it around a couple of times, admire the carving, then put it down again, quickly, almost uneasily, wondering why he had given so much time to making the things. He never tried to sell them and never gave any as a present to anybody; he didn't hang them on his wall at home; as soon as he finished one, he put it away stored flat in a cupboard and began to make another.

These were virtually his last works. When he had run out of his stock of mirrors, he made a few more baubles, little toys that Madame Nochère would beg him to make for one or another of her innumerable great-nephews or for one of the children in the building or the block who had just caught whooping cough or measles or mumps. He always began by saying no, then ended up making an exception for a two-dimensional wooden bunny with ears that flapped, or a cardboard puppet or a rag doll or a little landscape with a handle which when turned made you see first a rowing boat, then a sailing boat, then a swan-shaped punt pulling a water-skier.

Then, four years ago, two years before he died, he stopped altogether, carefully packed his tools away, and dismantled his workbench.

At first, he still enjoyed going out. He would go to the park at Monceau for a walk, or would go down Rue de Courcelles and Avenue Franklin-Roosevelt as far as the Marigny gardens, at the bottom of the Champs-Elysées. He would sit on a bench, legs together, his chin resting on the handle of his walking stick, which he gripped with both hands, and he would stay like that for an hour

or two, without moving, looking straight ahead at the children playing in the sand or at the old blue-and-orange-canvas-covered roundabout with its horses and their stylised manes and its two gondolas decorated with an orange-coloured sun, or at the swings or the little Punch and Judy stall.

Soon his excursions became less frequent. One day he asked Valène if he would be kind enough to come to the cinema with him. They went to the Film Theatre at the Palais de Chaillot one afternoon to see *Green Pastures*, an ugly, feeble rehash of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On leaving, Valène asked him why he'd wanted to see this film; he replied that it was only because of the title, because of that word "pastures", and that if he'd known that it was going to be what they'd just seen, he would never have come.

After that he only went out to have his meals at Riri's. He would come at about eleven in the morning. He would sit down at a little round table, between the counter and the terrace, and Madame Riri or one of her daughters would bring a big bowl of chocolate and two fine slices of bread and butter. That wasn't his breakfast but his lunch, it was his favourite food, the only thing he ate with real pleasure. Then he would read the papers, all the papers that Riri took – *The Auvergne Messenger*, *The Soft Drink Echo* – as well as those left by the morning's customers: *L'Aurore*, *Le Parisien Libéré*, or, less often, *Le Figaro*, *L'Humanité*, or *Libération*. He didn't skim through them but read them through conscientiously, line by line, without making any heartfelt or perspicacious or indignant comments, but in a calm and settled manner, without taking his eyes off the page, not noticing the midday cannon which filled the café with the hubbub of fruit machines and jukeboxes, glasses, plates, the noises of voices and of chairs being pushed back. At two o'clock, when the effervescence of lunch subsided and Madame Riri went upstairs for a rest and the two girls did the washing-up in the tiny working quarters at the back of the café and Monsieur Riri drowsed over his accounts, Winckler was still there, in between the sports page and the used-car mart. Sometimes he stayed at his table all afternoon, but usually he went back up to his flat at around three o'clock and came down again at six: that was the great moment of his day, the time for his game of backgammon with Morellet. Both played heatedly, excitedly, breaking out into exclamations, swearwords, and tempers, which

were not surprising in Morellet but seemed quite incomprehensible in Winckler – a man whose calmness verged on apathy, whose patience, sweetness, and resignation were imperturbable, whom no one had ever seen angry; such a man could, when for example it was Morellet's go and he threw a double five, thus enabling him to get his leading man to a blot and back in one go (he persisted in calling it his "jockey" in the name of an allegedly rigorous etymology he had found in some dubious source like Vermot's *Almanach* or the *Reader's Digest* "Enlarge Your Vocabulary" column), such a man, then, was able to seize the board with both hands and send it flying, calling Morellet a cheat and unleashing a quarrel which the café's customers sometimes took ages to sort out. Usually, though, it all calmed down pretty quickly so that the game could begin again before they shared, in freshly made-up amity, the veal cutlet with pasta shells or the liver with creamed potatoes that Madame Riri cooked especially for them. But several times one or other went out slamming the door behind him, thus depriving himself of backgammon and of dinner.

In his last year he didn't go out at all. Smautf became accustomed to taking him up his meals twice a day, and seeing to his cleaning and washing. Morellet, Valène, or Madame Nochère did all the bits of shopping he needed. He stayed all day in his pyjama trousers and a sleeveless red cotton vest over which he would pull, when he was cold, a kind of indoor jacket of soft flannel and a polka-dot scarf. Valène called on him in the afternoon several times. He found him sitting at his table looking at the hotel labels that Smautf had added for him to each of the watercolours he'd despatched: Hotel Hilo Honolulu, Villa Carmona Granada, Hotel Theba Algeciras, Hotel Peninsula Gibraltar, Hotel Nazareth Galilee, Hotel Cosmo London, s.s. *Ile de France*, Regis Hotel, Hotel Canada, Mexico DF, Hotel Astor New York, the Town House Los Angeles, s.s. *Pennsylvania*, Hotel Mirador Acapulco, Compaña Mexicana de Aviación, etc. He wanted, so he said, to sort the labels into order, but it was very difficult: of course, there was chronological order, but he found it poor, even poorer than alphabetical order. He had tried by continents, then by country, but that didn't satisfy him. What he would have liked would be to link each label to the next, but each time in respect of something else: for example, they could have some detail in common, a mountain or

volcano, an illuminated bay, some particular flower, the same red and gold edging, the beaming face of a groom, or the same dimensions, or the same typeface, or similar slogans ("Pearl of the Ocean", "Diamond of the Coast"), or a relationship based not on similarity but on opposition or a fragile, almost arbitrary association: a minute village by an Italian lake followed by the skyscrapers of Manhattan, skiers followed by swimmers, fireworks by candlelit dinner, railway by aeroplane, baccarat table by chemin de fer, etc. It's not just hard, Winckler added, above all it's useless: if you leave the labels unsorted and take two at random, you can be sure they'll have at least three things in common.

After a few weeks he put the labels back in the shoebox where he kept them and tidied the box away in the back of his cupboard. He didn't start on anything special again. He stayed all day in his bedroom, sitting in his armchair by the window, looking down onto the street, or maybe not even looking, just staring at nothing. On his bedside table there was a radio that was permanently on at low volume; no one ever really knew if he could hear it, although one day he did stop Madame Nochère from switching it off, saying that he listened to the hit parade every night.

Valène had his bedroom immediately above Winckler's workroom, and for nearly forty years his days had been accompanied by the thin noise of the craftsman's tiny files, the almost inaudible throb of his jigsaw, the creaking of his floorboards, the whistling of his kettle when he boiled water, not for making tea but for some glue or glaze he needed for his puzzles. Now, since he had dismantled his bench and packed away his tools, he never went into the room. He never told anybody how he spent his days and nights. People only knew that he hardly slept anymore. When Valène came to see him, he entertained him in his bedroom; he offered him his armchair and sat on the edge of the bed. They didn't talk much. Once he said he was born at La Ferté-Milon, on the Ourcq Canal. Another time, with sudden warmth, he told Valène about the man who had taught him his work.

He was called Monsieur Gouttman and he made religious artefacts which he sold himself in churches and procurators' offices: crosses, medals, and rosaries of every size, candelabra for oratories, portable

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## CHAPTER TEN

# *Servants' Quarters, 4*

On the top floor, a tiny little room, occupied by a sixteen-year-old girl, Jane Sutton, who works as an au pair for the Rorschachs.

The girl is standing by the window. Her face is lit up with joy as she reads a letter – or maybe, even, rereads it for the twentieth time – whilst chewing the crust end of a French loaf. There is a cage hanging in the window; it holds a bird with grey plumage, with a metal ring on its foot.

The bed is very narrow: actually it's a foam mattress laid on three wooden cubes which serve as drawers, and covered with a patchwork quilt. Fixed to the wall above the bed is a cork board, about two feet by three, on which are pinned several bits of paper – instructions for the use of an electric toaster, a laundry ticket, a calendar, an *Alliance Française* timetable, and three photographs showing the girl – two or three years younger – in school plays put on at Greenhill, near Harrow, where, some sixty-five years previously, Bartlebooth, following in the footsteps of Byron, Sir Robert Peel, Sheridan, Spencer, John Percival, Lord Palmerston, and dozens of other equally eminent men, had been educated.

On the first photo Jane Sutton appears as a page, dressed in red brocade breeches with gold piping, light-red hose, a white shirt, and a short, collarless doublet, red in colour, with slightly puffed sleeves and edged with a yellow silk fringe.

On the second, she is Princess Beryl, kneeling at the bedside of her grandfather, King Utherpandragon ("*When King Utherpandragon felt the sickness of death coming upon him, he had the princess brought to his side . . .*").

The third snapshot shows fourteen girls in a row. Jane is the fourth from the left (an X over her head shows which she is, otherwise it would be hard to recognise her). It is the last scene from Yorick's *Count of Gleichen*:

The Count of Gleichen was taken prisoner in a battle against the Saracens, and condemned to slavery. As he was employed in the gardens of the harem, the Sultan's daughter espied him. She judged him to be a man of quality, was inspired with love for him, and offered to assist in his escape if he would marry her. He gave the reply that he was married already; which caused not the slightest scruple to the princess, accustomed as she was to the plurality of wives. They soon agreed on't, set sail, and landed at Venice. The Count went to Rome, and told Pope Gregory IX his tale in every particular. On the Count's promise to convert the Saracen, the Pope gave him a dispensation to keep both his wives.

His first wife was so overcome with joy at her husband's return, no matter what conditions were attach'd to it, that she acquiesced to everything, and demonstrated the full extent of her gratitude to her benefactress. History recounts that the Saracen had no children, and loved those of her rival as their mother did. What pity 'tis, that she did not bring into the world a being that resembled her!

At Gleichen can be seen the bed in which these three rare individuals slept together. They were buried in the same grave, at the Benedictine monastery at Saint Petersburg; and the Count, who survived both his wives, ordered that their tomb, which was later to be his own also, should bear this epitaph, which he composed:

"Here lie two rival wives who loved each other as sisters, and loved me in equal measure. One of them abandoned Mahomet to follow her husband, and the other threw herself into the arms of the rival who brought him back to her. United by ties of love and marriage, we had but one nuptial bed throughout our lives; and the same stone covereth us all after death." An oak and two limes, as is proper, were planted beside the grave.

the Comoro Islands, where they can easily be exchanged for Indian cowries (*Cypraea caput serpentis*) at a very favourable rate of fifteen caput serpentis for one turdus. Now not far away, in Dar-es-Salaam, the rate for caput serpentis is constantly going up, and deals are often struck there at one caput serpentis for three *Cypraea moneta*. This last kind of cowries is commonly called the coin-cowrie: as you would expect from its name, it is negotiable almost everywhere, but in West Africa, in Cameroon and especially in Gabon, it is so highly valued that some tribes pay for it with its own weight in gold. With all expenses offset, you could aim to multiply your stake tenfold. The operation was entirely safe but needed time. Rorschach didn't feel he had the makings of a great traveller and was not too keen, but the trader's certainty was sufficiently impressive to make him accept unhesitatingly the offer of partnership that was put to him when they landed at Aden.

The transactions proceeded exactly as the trader had foreseen. In Aden they exchanged their shipments of copper and sewing machines for forty cases of Cypraea turdus without any difficulty. They left the Comoros with eight hundred cases of caput serpentis, the only problem having been to get the wood for the said cases. In Dar-es-Salaam they chartered a caravan of two hundred and fifty camels to cross Tanganyika with their one thousand nine hundred and forty cases of coin-cowries, reached the great Congo river, and made their descent nearly to the estuary in four hundred and seventy-five days, of which two hundred and twenty-one had been spent on water, one hundred and thirty-seven in rail transshipment, twenty-four in portered transshipment, and ninety-three days in waiting, resting, enforced idleness, palavers, administrative hassles, and diverse incidents and nuisances, which nonetheless constituted, all in all, a remarkable achievement.

It was a little over two and a half years since they had landed at Aden. What they didn't know – and how in God's name could they have known! – was that, at the very time they got to Aden, another Frenchman, called Schlendrian, was leaving Cameroon after flooding it with coin-cowries obtained in Zanzibar; he had brought about an irreversible depreciation of the currency throughout Western and Central Africa. Rorschach's and his partner's cowries had not just become unnegotiable, they had become a dangerous liability: the

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