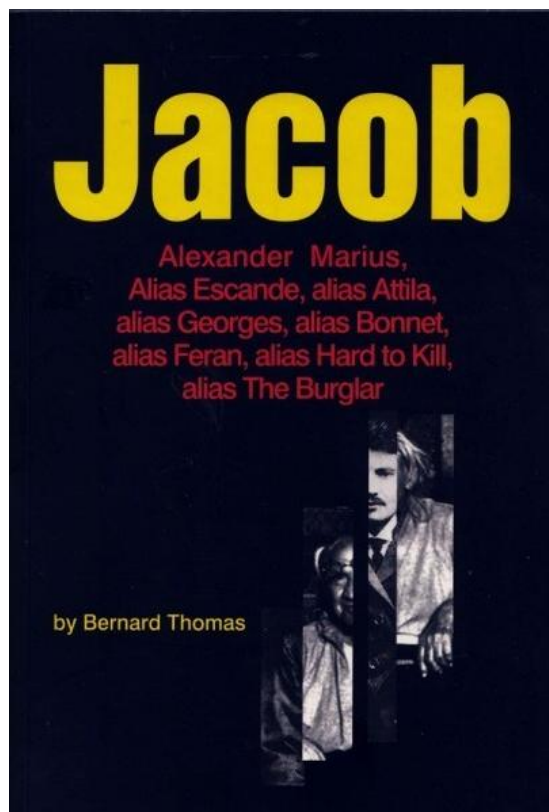


# Alexander Marius Jacob

Alias Escande, alias Attila, alias Georges, alias Bonnet, alias Feran, alias Hard to Kill, alias The Burglar

Bernard Thomas



1970

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## Introduction

Rigor and precision have finally disappeared from the field of human procrastination. With the recognition that a strictly organisational perspective is not enough to solve the dilemma of 'what is to be done', the need for order and security has transferred itself to the field of desire. A last stronghold built in fret and fury, it has established a bridgehead for the final battle. Desire is sacred and inviolable. It is what we hold in our hearts, child of our instincts and mother of our dreams. We can count on it, it will never betray us.

The newest graves, those on the edges of the cemeteries of the peripheries, are full of this irrational phenomenology. We take things into consideration that would have made us laugh not long ago. We assign stability and pulsion to what we know, basically, is nothing but a vague recollection of a fleeting wellbeing. A wing in the mist, a morning flutter that soon disappeared before the need to repeat itself, that obsessive, disrespectful bureaucrat lurking in some obscure corner of us, selecting and codifying dreams like all the other scribblers in the mortuary of repression.

Short-lived flashes bear witness to the heroic deeds of some comrade, some rebel here and there, stealing a glance before history brands and immobilizes him in the perfectly tormented flesh. We are not inane watchers of junk TV or readers of the serial romances that are now buried in dusty library catalogues. We are alive and for life, so have direct experience. As soon as a vital sign appears here and there, we pick it up with the point of our fingernail and place it in the secret wallet of our heart, a tiny heart-shaped icon or forget-me-not.

Basically we too, the hard, dauntless ones with our refractory refusal to accommodate or to be discouraged by the threats of the institutions or the far more terrible ones of imbecility camouflaged as rebellion, also need our iconography. That is why we amass memories, sympathies, friendship—sometimes a mere handshake—storing them up in our minds as sharing and support, when not direct participation. How many of us have not cracked open bank safes and treasuries, carried out radical expropriation, taken land from the latifundi and killed enemies in shoot-out at sunset, at this hallucinatory level. And by reading and feeling this great emotion we elaborate in our wildest fantasy things that really did happen, just like the tales in front of the fire when grandmother gave the correct interpretation of Red Riding hood's rosy cheeks. We have only participated in them from afar (in the best of cases), addressing the liveliest part of our desires to them. And that is that, while the critique that sided with the wolf and not the child remains in the loft. Rigorous science is no longer possible: don't you remember? So how can we put any criteria in our fantasy. Let's leave it at full gallop, far from the sepsis that used to confuse us not long ago. Let's warm our hearts—like taking a cold meal—with tales of adventure like the one we are presenting here—moreover one that is not all that badly realised.

The story tells of a thief. A thief with egalitarian illusions. An anarchist and his dreams. But with a difference: this man, along with his comrades, really did open the safes of the rich, and by this simple fact demonstrated that an attack on social wealth, even if only partial, is possible.

It might seem insignificant that this be the most interesting part of the whole story, but that is not so. The spectacular aspect of the activity of Jacob and his comrades, the incredible list of their robberies and the elegant way they were carried out, are not the most important aspects. But they could be those that strike the reader's fantasy most, even the anarchist reader. Basically, now as in the past, we still want someone to supply the iconography we cannot do without. The comparison with Arsen Lupin is enough. Maurice Leblanc was a well-known serial romance writer; Bernard Thomas is a serial journalist. The two genres go hand in hand.

But Jacob and the others were something else. In the first place, they were comrades. And it is here, in the field of their choice of actions, that we need to grasp the deeper significance of their exploits. The description of acting beyond the levels that most people put up with daily is implicit in the story, although it does not succeed in completely rendering the levels of consciousness that were necessary in order to do this. This 'going beyond' was faced and taken to the extreme consequences with all that was extraordinary, not as something mythical but in the reality that Jacob and the others faced in order to carry out their attacks. Procedure and method, rigidity and anarchist ethics in dealing with the representatives of the class in power, are but a few aspects of the tale. It is therefore necessary to put description aside and dig deeper beyond the fiction, in order to reach a point for reflection.

What does it mean to reach out and put one's hands on other people's property? To answer this question and look at some of the mistakes systematically made by many comrades as well as those specifically connected to Jacob's illusions, we need to make a few not very pleasant points. The first is that theft, appropriation in general, carried out with strength or guile and not simply by ceasing work, is not an arm which can lead to social levelling. No matter how colossal the "illegal" appropriation is, it is but a small thing compared to the wild accumulation that capital puts at the disposition of the financial bosses, the wealthy, the managers of the huge public enterprises, the warlords and every kind of Mafia. The appropriation we are talking about and which was certainly sufficient to make the well-fed bourgeoisie of the French empire tremble, was simply a means to be used elsewhere in order to attempt to set off the generalising of the struggle which for anarchists is the primary aim of all revolutionary activity. I believe that this is now clear once and for all but the ingenuous.

Another myth that needs to be dispelled is that such actions could become a model for the oppressed as a simple, quick way to regain possession of what has been extracted from them by force through exploitation and repression. Right from the first rather banal raids on supermarkets, the concept of proletarian expropriation makes no more sense than the scenario for a film of the life of a revolutionary expropriator: from Durruti to Bonnot, Sabate to Facérias, Di Giovanni to Pollastro. The passive fruition of heroic deeds always produces myths, tales for adults that the frustrating conditions of life demand nonstop, prostheses that help one to carrying on living in just the same way as alcohol or sleeping pills do. The overall conditions of the struggle could, at any given moment under certain conditions of a social or economic nature, produce movements of great masses within which expropriation, becoming generalised, ends up being a daily practice. But that all germinates spontaneously and has no need for models.

But if we think seriously about what the anarchist who asks himself what is to be done from a revolutionary point of view faces, the problem presents itself in more detail. It becomes necessary to resolve one's relationship with reality as clearly as possible, a reality that is rigidly incarcerated within the conditions of life marked by production and consumerism. Of course, as we all know, one can 'cop out' (up to a point), close oneself up in the idyllic conditions of a commune rich in hideous self-exploitation and frustrating conditions of life, or in the fresh air of a supposedly uncontaminated nature. Or, within the enclosure of interpersonal relationships, seek to create conditions that allow one to go beyond the cohabitation sadly marked by the classical limitations of the couple, to the point of knifing oneself. All this is possible, and at times even beautiful, but it is not enough. Going further, beyond, always further, one finds the first signs of the real problem: what do we want to do with our lives? Do we want to live them as fully as possible, or do we

want to hand over a considerable part of them in exchange for a salary camouflaged as economic services rendered?

There are many ways to camouflage this exchange today: voluntary work is one of them. There are many ways to become involved in the social field at the tail end of new political models aimed at guaranteeing social peace, and be compensated with unexpectedly large amounts of 'free time'. Power realizes that it must attract this band of social misfits to within the field of control by using increasingly intelligent methods because they are precisely the ones who could react violently to normal working conditions. And many are falling over backwards to make the compromise more attractive in this direction. But conditions of privilege do not make us masters of ourselves. Work, even voluntary work (that's a manner of speaking), eats away at our soul. In a word, we become what we are doing. We are what we produce, and if we produce condescension and acceptance, we ourselves become the policeman standing on the street corner, or even the torturer in the white coat, or the prison warder brandishing a bunch of keys in his gloved hand.

According to Jacob, if we do not want to eat our hearts out there is nothing else for it, we must stretch out a hand to the property of others. But in order to reach out we must have a clear conscience, otherwise we would simply be carrying out more or less gaudy transfers of wealth, nothing more. The way to look at things then is to see what the expropriator, he who recuperates from a revolutionary point of view, is proposing: what does he intend to do about everything that needs to be done with this wider space of freedom of movement? We are not talking about real freedom here. Freedom does not come from having more money, but from the greater capacity within which to operate, more time to realize one's revolutionary project. As you can see, this has little that is mythical or fascinating about it. It is simply a case of being able to realize revolutionary projects which would otherwise be clipped in the wings due to lack of means. The world in which I operate with my revolutionary activity involves my whole self. There is not me living my life on the one hand and my revolutionary activity on the other. That is why I cannot suffer the consequences of an absurd dichotomy that lacerates me: worker and revolutionary producing wealth for the exploiters on the one hand, and combating them and the very flux that I contribute to with my own work, on the other.

A classical objection to this is that theft is also work, and produces wealth. Jacob and his comrades also accepted this interpretation, calling themselves '*Nightworkers*'. Personally, I have always seen this label in the ironic sense. At the time it threw fear into the hearts of the bourgeoisie, who had not forgotten the days of Seventy-one. In itself, the objection is not unfounded. If nothing else, the outlaw produces the judge, a considerable part of prison, a great coming and going of lawyers and court employees, and a whole repressive mentality going right from the wealthy to the old lady who is afraid of being robbed of her pension. All this undoubtedly goes to make up the game. Theft in all its forms is a working activity that employs thousands of 'legal workers', themselves only just a step above poverty, and systematically robbed by a system that pushes them towards a retinue of brilliant prospects of consumerism. If the revolutionary were to fall into this trap (as Malatesta seems to fear is inevitable), he would be a fool just like any poor soul who hands over his booty, fruit of honest robberies, to the first salesman of expensive cars he comes across. I do not even want to think of this eventuality which in any case, for what my personal experience is worth, is not very common.

But the other aspect of the problem still holds. Theft is not something that can be improvised: it requires professionalism and commitment, punctuality, precision and cold blood, knowledge of human psychology and the most advanced techniques of prevention and control. In a word, it

requires time. So it is neither a question of a generous gift, nor an exciting adventure. It nearly always becomes a meticulous routine that tires out the best of comrades. Mistakes are often made one way or the other: either by supposing such activity to be easier than it is, or by thinking that it is more complex and exciting. It is important to bear all the various problems involved in mind, and no romanced narration can help us in that. Then, after thinking about it, one might reach the conclusion that such efforts could, under certain conditions and in certain situations, be the most effective way to begin to carry out a revolutionary project.

Not being capable of grasping what pushes many rebels to single out the enemy, I know that my conclusions will not please many comrades. I'm sorry, but never having been a rebel I wouldn't know where to begin. I only hope that the few revolutionaries, to whom these considerations are addressed, at least know how to read them for what they are: a critical reflection and the antecedent of an operative programme.

Alfredo M. Bonanno  
Catania, 10 October 1999

# The Bandits

Wednesday, March 1905, the day after Carnival. Riot is in the air as an extraordinary trial, which the outstanding journalist Louis Roubaud was 20 years later to recall as 'one of the most formidable cases recorded in the history of crime', opens before the Somme assize court.

Streets adjacent to the Bicêtre prison where the accused are lodged have been blocked off. Amiens court-house, ringed by three companies of chasseurs on foot and by all available personnel from the gendarmerie, is in a state of siege. Since daybreak a sizeable and edgy crowd has been gathering. Prowling around and 'easily recognisable' say the experts, 'by their shifty and sinister appearance', are some detectives dispatched from Paris by the head of the Surêté. 'In high places', they do not disguise that fact that incidents are feared. Maybe an escape.

Every step along the progress through the corridors brings one up to troops, service revolver or fixed bayonet by their sides. A pass is required before access may be gained to the courtroom. Suspicious-looking sensation-seekers are peremptorily turned away. Access to the holy of holies is granted only to those whose dress is testimony to their respectability... the well-to-do, property owners, officials and functionaries: agitators would have their work cut out to blend in with this crowd.

The major newspapers—*Le Figaro*, *Le Temps*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *L'Aurore*, *Le Matin*, *L'Eclair* and their junior competitors like *Voix du Nord* or *Gil Blas*, (for which latter Maurice Leblanc, the Norman shipowner's son who, before three months have elapsed, is going to invent the character Arsène Lupin), have sent their finest reporters along. Ten correspondents from the biggest foreign newspapers have found themselves seats. In the kiosks in every town in France, enormous headlines are already whipping up public opinion... 'A monstrous business', 'One hundred and fifty crimes', 'Five million francs stolen'<sup>1</sup> 'The Night Workers. An unbelievable organisation.' All manner of things, mind-numbing things. The prosecution file, 161 pages of painstaking manuscript, covers 20,000 items. 158 witnesses to be heard. An overwhelming burden of proof.

The police and magistrates aim to keep this affair within the narrow limits of criminal procedure. Wisely, the chief news organs have followed them in this. However, one cannot avert certain rumours racing through the crowd. To the effect that the accused are redoubtable anarchists. Anarchists! Shudders. Everyone remembers the bombs of Ravachol, Emile Henry and August Vaillant. Elegant ladies experience a delicious quiver at the mention of those queer romantics who schemed from the dark recesses of their offices to blow society asunder. The rentiers, though delighted to have 24 of their personal enemies brought to book here today cannot disguise their anxiety: five of the ruffians are still on the loose. What are they hatching? Such people are capable of anything. They respect nothing... not morality, nor religion, nor the flag,

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<sup>1</sup> Gold francs are difficult to translate into contemporary money, budgets in those days having little in common with our own. However, one can reckon on the following basis: 20 francs were then the equivalent of one 'louis'; in 1969 one louis was worth roughly 60 francs. So one need only multiply by three. Which in this instance would give us 15 million revalued francs. A *premier main* with the house of Worth was then earning 250 francs monthly: a good carpenter was making 300.

nor government. Nor, above all, private property, regarding which—in order to excuse their own misdeeds—they contend is theft. The court, they hope, will show no mercy: these ruffians must be dealt with severely. To set an example. Culpable clemency would risk inciting others to swell their ranks. All things considered, the *Apaches* are more deserving of indulgence: at least with them, one knows what one is faced with.

Sinister rumours are circulating among the more ‘proper’ elements in the crowd. Some suspect the gang of having immense ramifications in France, England, Holland, Germany, Italy and Spain. The accused persons are no more than their minions. The real culprits are those unscrupulous agitators hired by foreign powers to weaken the Republic, that whole shady cancer of pseudo-thinkers, assassins and Jews overrunning the country, abetted by a handful of Freemasons infected with the cholera of subversion and striving to capitalise upon the ingenuousness of the people in order to establish a dictatorship of bloodthirsty brigands. But the workers are not so stupid. They are well aware that France is a democracy, that they like everyone else, have the right to vote and that the government’s decisions are but the expression of the will of the majority. Their will. To which the minority has to defer. Anyone refusing to play by these rules constitutes a danger to the established order and is indicted by society. In this instance the authorities are displaying an excess of patience. The ‘Abbeville gang’ should not be alone on the bench of infamy. All anarchists, all reds should be there with them.

Distrustfully, the populace teeming in its thousands towards the rue des Trois-Cailloux hears out these witch-hunters. Dress and vocabulary alike have erected a barrier between them. Instinctively, trickery is scented.

Then again, what the newspapers reiterate is too pat: if the accused are vulgar thieves, how come so many precautions? Why this deployment of men? There is something queer about this. To be sure, a thief is a malefactor. To be sure, it is normal that he should be punished. Yet one does not know what to think.

It is with curiosity, almost deferentially that the rubbernecks mouth the name of the gang’s leader, a curious sort, an adventurer, monster or apostle according to one’s views... One Alexandre-Marius Jacob. The more literate mention him in the same breath as Robin Hood, Cartouche and Mandrin. Some students of English even have recourse to the term ‘gentleman burglar’. But the juxtaposition of the two words, though engaging, is scarcely convincing. Lupin has not yet popularised the notion. There is a lot of gossip. It is said that Jacob attacked only the rich, that he kept back nothing for himself from the proceeds of his misdeeds, but redistributed them all among the poor. It is said that Jacob had forbidden his men to take a life. Except in self-defence and then only where the police were concerned, these being christened by him ‘society’s guard dogs’. While one might not be able to openly endorse that, the fact remains that the idea of downing a cop down some dark alley is not one that everybody finds displeasing: let he who never dreamed of it—if only he might be assured of impunity, of course—cast the first stone. In short, this outlaw is intriguing. The women hope he will be handsome.

It is known that Jacob comes from Marseilles; that he is a mere 26 years of age. They say that he has dark eyes, that he fears nothing and no one and is a sort of genius. He has friends everywhere. He will slip through their fingers. He will vanish as if by magic. Anyway, the Germinal gang await only the merest error by the guards to fly to his aid.

‘Germinal’, the erudite remember that last cry set up by the teenage Angiollilo after he had gunned down Canovas, the Spanish premier, the man responsible for the Montjuich tortures a



good eight years ago now, in 1897. *Germinal*... the Republican month of renewal, of hope: in particular it is the month in the Year Two when a revolt erupted in the Paris faubourgs, demanding bread and implementation of the Constitution of 1793, the only constitution to have been truly democratic, the only one never to have come in to force; '*Germinal*': 'The ideas for which I perish will shortly thrive,' the young avenger had probably said at the time.

A band of French anarchists seized upon the word, the way one passes the baton in a relay race, making it the title of a newspaper. The Amiens police were immediately stirred by their activities.

They ensconced themselves first in 69, rue Saint-Germain and then in 26, rue Saint-Roch four months ago, in November 1904. The editorial of the first issue gave clear, if moderate, expression to the underlying implications of the venture.

'Workers!

Despite all the promises of the politicians of every colour, your lot is becoming increasingly precarious.

The press says naught of the vexations of every sort visited upon you by the exploiters in their modern prisons (...)

Frankly libertarian, *Germinal* will not be treading the muddy byways of politics, unless to unmask the tricksters and flatterers teeming there. Emanating from the people's ranks and made by the people, *Germinal* will be striving to truly become the journal of the Amiens populace (...)

The countless victims of priests, sabre-rattlers, judges, police and bosses will be able to have their cry of rebellion heard here without fear of being revealed. We have sufficient revolutionary energy to take upon ourselves full responsibility before laws that we hold sovereignly in contempt.

Let each one do his duty, and *Germinal* will live to make the well-fed and the complacent perish of rage, while paving the way for the Social Revolution from which Freedom will come forth at last.'

This profession of faith in no way resembles a pious vow. The paper has organised meetings, gatherings, conferences, demonstrations, on every pretext. It has nailed the slightest local scandal: the 14 to 15 hours worked each day by the crewmen in the railway depots; the working conditions of the railway workshop and depot employees, 10 hours a day without the right to speak, under the supervision of retired policemen; the congratulations sent by General de Nonancourt to Lieutenant de la Roche when the latter was acquitted by the Toul court of correction despite the punch that he struck the editor of *La Moselle* who refused to give way to him: 'This act will impose and force respect for officers. Fear is the beginning of wisdom. I can still see myself in Paris in '71, right after the Commune: they would all scatter at the approach of officers' ('After the 35,000 corpses that they had just made, there was reason to respect these gentlemen,' commented *Germinal*).

But, among the many victims of the 'judges and sabre-rattlers', one seemed immediately to enjoy a privileged position in the columns of this highly subversive organ. From issue No.2 onwards, under the rubric of 'Petite Correspondence' insertions reading thus began to appear... 'I know lots'. 'Reply: We will put your information to good use at the opportune moment, the dossier of the Gentleman in question is well under way.' Or even... 'Would the comrade who has sent us intelligence concerning the police make himself known so as to assist us in the enquiry on which we have embarked on this matter.'

Who is this Gentleman? What can this matter be? Those in the know claim that it is purely and simply a question of Alexandre-Marius Jacob. The launching of the bimonthly four months in advance of the trial and in the very town where that trial must take place is allegedly no coincidence. It was allegedly part of a two-pronged effort: to capitalise upon the audience which the Jacob affair could not fail to provide for the cause, with an eye to stepping up agitation and propaganda in the region, and to strive by every means to rescue the comrade in jeopardy.

A newspaper specifically set up to defend a thief? Yes. And indeed, it was said, the newspaper of a thief, for Jacob had allegedly managed to get money out of his prison cell to his friends on the outside: the last of his savings. Jules Lemaire, Pacaud and Ouin, the principals behind the journal are openly talking of funds which they have raised: displaying more discretion, they hint at one 'Alexandre', without whom nothing would have been possible. Enough said.

Be that as it may, issue No 4 of 3 January devoted the entirety of its editorial comment to him, beneath the headline 'To Jacob and his comrades':

'Judges, civil servants, priests, soldiers, gendarmes, police, lawyers, businessmen all conspire to keep the people hungry, to wall them up in factories, to do them to death in their prisons.

Markets are monopolised, there is speculation, there is hoarding, there is wheeling and dealing, stocks are driven down prior to purchase, driven up prior to sale: gold shapes policy, bankers declare war. This is lawful.

The worker is exploited: they capitalise upon his ignorance and resignation: some are harried into insolvency and poverty, others are prompted into strike, revolt, starvation, others still into thieving, hopelessness, suicide, murder. This, again, is lawful.

The factories, prisons and barracks are breeding grounds for typhus and tuberculosis. The penniless are cast into the streets. The homeless are cast into prison. The law is the instrument of persecution. This, again, is lawful.

You, Jacob, who refuse to be the rich man's slave or to exploit the poor,

You who shun the suicide of brutalising toil and who rebel against a criminal society,

You who at last seek to live,

You are society's victim!'

The word 'victim' was doubtless hardly calculated to endear itself to Jacob at the very time when he had to admit his crimes, which he regarded as so many acts of war. But he did not have unrestricted communication with the outside and only belatedly was he able to convey how he felt. Small matter for the time being: the article sets the tone. It is followed by a veritable manifesto: 'To work according to one's ability and talents; to consume according to one's needs: that is the sole solution to the social question. It is the right of which capitalist society, represented today by the social-democratic minister Combes refuses to let us avail, and which it strangles with the cord of the *lois scélérates* (...) Out of a population of some 40 millions, a mere 4 million men labour as toilers. And still these produce too much, as government figures themselves indicate, for there is unemployment and overproduction.

Thus if everyone capable of it were to engage in useful production, each person (and we are not counting adolescents, women, or the aged) would have to work only half an hour each day from the age of 20 to the age of 50, which is to say 540 ten hour days in his whole life!'

The writer stipulates that in his reckoning he has taken no account of that segment of workers whose task consists of the maintenance of order or the repression of disorder... civil servants, bureaucrats of every description, police, soldiers, magistrates... and who account for two thirds

of wage earners. Logic taken to its extremes potentially leads to such things: a fair number of us would be constrained, on pain of finding themselves unemployed again, to participate willy-nilly in the repression of others. Absurd? In any event, Jacob has not disowned these lines.

Issue No 5 of *Germinal*, dated 17 January: 'Louise Michel, our beloved Louise, the 'Red Virgin', is no more. All humanity is bereft.' In his cell, when informed of the news, Jacob, it seems, blanched. The good Louise was a part of his belief system, from his teenage days at sea, ever since the day when he had heard her mentioned by convicts in Nouméa. Later he had become very well acquainted with her, as with all the great names of the libertarian world who are presently signing articles in his favour in every anarchist publication... Sébastien Faure, Fortuné Henry the lecturer, the very brother of the dynamiter, Laurent Tailhade, the poet blinded in one eye by an anarchist bomb in the Foyot restaurant, or indeed Paraf-Javal the individualist, or Libertad. Not forgetting all the others who do not have by-lines but are activists. So, were the rentiers so very wrong to take fright? And what if all these 'intellectuals' were to amass a horde of henchmen: what if they were really to hatch a plot to rescue the bandit?

The tone of their newspapers furnishes reason to fear the worst. They are mad dogs. Why doesn't someone render them harmless? Early in February, Issue No. 7 of *Germinal* says:

'Now that the Russian revolution has been thwarted, the primary maxim in the manual of the perfect revolutionary ought to be this one: 'If you wish freedom, buy a rifle! If you have not the money, steal it!'' A downright incitement to murder. Maybe Jacob himself has not himself taken a life, but he is on the same side as the raging madmen. It is a capital offence to attack strongboxes out of idealism: his head must roll for it.

Less than a month ago, on 12 February, Sébastien Faure came here to give a talk at the Alcazar. As is his wont, he besmirched the name of the army, the expeditionary force covering itself in glory in the Far East, then moved on to the clergy, the police and the judiciary. Police spies posted in the hall took careful note of it. But that talk was only a pretext upon which to assemble the largest possible public gathering. The orator was in on it. In small groups, several thousand people assembled in the rue Delambre. The Alcazar emptied. A demonstration set off in the direction of the rue de Bicêtre, singing the Internationale. There it clashed with a strong contingent of troops happily posted at random on guard duty in front of the prison. The procession dallied for a long time to beard the troops with shouts of: 'Long live Jacob! Long live the revolution! Long live anarchy!'

Then, all of a sudden, there was an incident. Straboni, a guard brought in specially from Rouen to watch over Jacob lest he manage to convert the usual screws to his own way of thinking, as he had successfully done in the past... this Straboni, attracted by the furore, stepped out of the Lephay pot-house. He was without doubt a glass or two the worse for drink. Well, he drew his revolver, screaming that he was going to 'kill some of them'. The demonstrators threw themselves on him: they disarmed him and rained blows on him. The troops charged. 'Regret' was expressed at the ten or so wounded.

In the wake of this affray, Superintendent Jénnot summoned the admitted leaders... Lemaire (the manager of the *Germinal* newspaper) and his cronies Pacaud and Ouin... to his office.

The anarchists sent him this note by way of reply: 'Monsieur Jénnot, you are summoned to appear at 10 am. on Monday at the offices of our newspaper at 26, rue Saint-Roch.'

Flabbergasted, Jénnot determined to appear there, in the company of a dozen men, and... it is true... at noon instead of 10 am... doubtless signifying that he was not at their beck and call. Needless to say, a search produced nothing. By contrast *Germinal* had the audacity to relate the

whole episode in its 17 February issue: not content with being criminals, these people showed themselves to be boors as well. One could scarcely expect anything better of them.

So on this 8 March 1905, while the Black Marias were being awaited, the people in charge of maintaining order prepared themselves for every eventuality. They were torn between 'cautious optimism' and 'reasonable caution', endeavouring not to yield to uncontrolled panic like last week when an apprentice plumber searching for leaks in the guttering upon the roofs of the Passage Couvreur, near the Bicêtre prison, found himself set upon by two gendarmes and handcuffed. Suspected of preparing an escape for Jacob, the unfortunate fellow had been interrogated throughout the night, somewhat brutally, by some overzealous inspectors. (Moreover, there was nothing to show that they were not in fact faced with an accomplice of the Robber).

From his vantage-point atop the staircase, the superintendent tries to divine the crowd's intentions. They are murmuring. Getting worked up. Ready to intervene, narks monitor its changing moods. He picks out scattered anarchists distributing packets of leaflets attempting to offer a justification of Jacob. Their manes of hair, their beards and sombre faces make them readily visible from a distance. Over on the left, three of them are trying to organise a meeting. Four plain clothed inspectors immediately move in to frustrate them. A crowd gathers round. Soon it degenerates into the most immense confusion. Five ranks of *chasseurs* protect the court-house, not to mention the troops held in reserve. The officials blithely step inside, mingling with the bourgeois who have come to watch the spectacle and who are holding forth on the threshold. Let us go! Disorder will not triumph this time!

But the ranting floats off in the direction of the boulevards. The rumbling of the Black Marias reverberates from the cobblestones. The escort appears, a squadron from the 30th Chasseurs Regiment headed by a general in undress. The muffled sound of a song covers everything... *la Carmagnole*, intoned by prisoners and taken up by 20, by 100, by 1000 raucous voices from the populace. The wagons come to a halt amid a clatter of ironwork. The infantrymen push back the huddled ranks of the crowds. The doors are opened. Four women disembark first, shackled in pairs: Jacob's mother, Rose his companion and two others pale and skinny and rather elegantly dressed, though their furs are mangy. The *Petit Parisien* and *Gil Blas* correspondents will be scathing about them in their reports: but it has to be said that, as these wretches are unloaded, they have been languishing in prison for the past two years and have scarcely had the opportunity to renew their wardrobe at Paquin's, Worth's or the Callot sisters' place.

Then it is the men's turn. Hollow cheeks, fiery looks. 'A truly strange sort, low-set, supple and agile as a sailor,' notes Monsieur Beau of the Havas Agency. 'A queer, devilish head, pierced in the middle by two bright points of extraordinary vivacity,' notes *L'Aurore*. 'A sallow face, the nose strong and flattened, the beard sparse, the lips sparse and pouting, the ears sticking out,' the reporter from *Le Petit Parisien*, unkindly notes. He is wearing a broad black bowler hat. He has on a black overcoat with astrakhan collar, a red tie and straight collar slightly crumpled at the edges. In his hand he has a huge briefcase stuffed with papers. 'It appears that inside the prison he has a secretary to whom he dictates his thoughts. His mother and mistress do nothing unless he has first given his consent', opines *Le Petit Parisien*. In any case, there is nothing about him that is redolent of a lout in a peaked cap. Nothing of the sinister-faced ogre. His dress is correct, his toilet painstaking, his moustaches crimped and almost bristling under his strong nose. Of medium build, but squat. He has the air of a civil servant, bordering on that of a teacher or savant. Two by two, his nineteen accomplices line up.

Jacob's face is brightened by a broad grin when he spots the crowd gaping at him. He makes to raise his arms, despite the shackles,. 'Long live anarchy!' he cries. 'Long live anarchy! Long live Jacob!' answer the onlookers in a burst of applause. The gendarmes step in: they jostle the prisoners, prodding them with vehemence towards the steps. Jacob does not comply. They have to drag him by the arm. His eyes sparkle. He sings the Internationale. The cortege, the women, the public, join in. The song rises into the air and ascends towards the overcast skies. The accused and their guards, followed by the flapping black sleeves of their lawyers, disappear beneath the archway. They vanish into the corridors. The team from *Germinal* tries to follow in their footsteps. Jénot signals to his men to head them off. The argument lasts barely a few seconds and then the anarchists give up the attempt. They vanish into the crush of people standing around in small knots waiting for God knows what.

The courtroom is shabby, dim, grimy, with faded frescoes on the back wall. Some benches and an additional platform have been arranged to accommodate the accused. The exhibits of the prosecution, a real mountain of them, overspill onto the press benches: jemmies, artistically laid out in order of size; bit-braces, drills, hacksaws, glass-cutters; some Edison lamps linked together by five metres of wiring; some oilcans, a few soapboxes.

Jacob's own personal kit, dubbed by him his 'double bass' is a wondrous specimen. The judicial police's best experts have given up on trying to understand the function of several instruments. They admit to never having seen anything like them. According to them there is at least 10,000 francs worth of equipment here. Let us listen to *Petit Parisien* 'Upwards of 80 keys in nickel-plated steel, each one actually comprising two keys, for there is an extremely ingenious moving part which, it seems, is of American manufacture. Furthermore, the end of these keys presents a rectangular-shaped recess which makes it possible to tailor a special attachment to the instrument for opening the most complicated locks. The malefactor also carried electric lamps, one of which, collapsible and fitted with reflectors, provided a powerful beam capable of lighting up an entire room. He also had in his possession a highly refined instrument designed to break open safes and from one of the finest companies in New York: a ladder of silk fitted at the ends with two sturdy hooks capable of gripping anywhere and other sundry accessories, all of them equally refined.' The whole thing fits into a black leather satchel just 70 centimetres long by 95 centimetres high.

At noon, the Court makes its entrance. Councillor Wehekind, who seems ill at ease, presides. He is assisted by his assessors Job Vaselle and Thorel. The procurator-general Regnault in person occupies the chair of the public prosecutor, aided by his deputy, Monsieur Pennelier.

First item of business: the drawing of lots for jury membership. First sensation: only 5 of those whose names are called are present. The others have been detained by urgent business. Or indeed by illness: one angina attack, some renal colic complaints, some severe bronchitis. An epidemic appears to have descended upon Amiens. Procurator Regnault appeals to a sense of civic duty, to dedication to the law: why did they come forward as volunteers only to absent themselves now? Some medical certificates, properly and duly completed, offer the only reply.

To tell the truth, the jury panel members were afraid. They have no wish to get embroiled in some squalid episode. They put themselves forward as volunteers in the trials of murderers, of 'normal' thieves. Not of anarchists. That is too risky. Their neighbours have intimated as much to them. Their wives have pleaded with them in the name of their children. And then... this is something that they do not admit... each one of them has received a threatening letter written in vitriol. Thrown for a moment, court president Wehekind regains his composure: let some

gendarmes be dispatched, accompanied by a doctor, to verify these excuses and summon the dodgers.

The sitting is suspended. For lunch. Capitalising upon the absence of the reporters, the troops have left unmanned the approaches to the courthouse, which are now deserted. In the clammy atmosphere about 50 soldiers are napping on the steps, belts unbuckled, rifle laid across their bellies. One would say it was the aftermath of battle. Thousands of leaflets litter the pathway. When at last the court resumes at 2 pm, the definitive jury is at last appointed... pallid men with worried brows and frightened faces. Then comes the establishment of the identities of the accused:

‘Jacob... Alexandre Marius, Fischer the clerk of the court calls out.

‘Present,’ he replies.

He is seated peacefully, tethered by his handcuffs to his warder guardian angel. The bowler hat is pulled down tight upon his head. He grins at the angels. The court president, who had not hitherto glanced in his direction, gives a start:

‘Stand up!’ he exclaims.

‘You’re well and truly seated, you are!’ Jacob returns.

‘And remove your hat when you address me!’

‘You’re well covered!’

‘You are here to stand trial. You must conform to practice and show greater decorum!’

‘This is a sham! A parody of justice! I will show regard for you when you show some for the workers!..’<sup>2</sup>

The gendarme escorting him snatches the hat from his head. The remainder of the outburst is lost amid the brouhaha.

‘Silence!’ shouts Wehekind. ‘Silence! Or I will have the court cleared.’

Then:

‘Do you wish to challenge any of the jury?’ he proceeds.

‘I challenge them all,’ answers Jacob, ‘for they are my enemies.’

Everyone catches his breath again. The enumeration of names, surnames, ages, professions proceeds without further incident. However, there is no article in the code capable of preventing the bandits from adopting an air of mockery. Next, the clerk sets about the litany of the 161 pages of the indictment sheet. The public strain to understand. Several of the accused ejaculate expressions of astonishment at the relation of certain exploits of their mastermind, of which they had been unaware. At 6 pm., after various formalities, their first day’s proceedings are concluded. When Jacob emerges, the crowd has formed again and is controlled by the cordons of chasseurs only with great difficulty.

Revolutionary songs burst forth on all sides. Two anarchists who succeed in gaining access to the courtroom despite superintendent Jénôt’s strict screening procedure rush to the printing works of *Germinal*, the workshop of Jules Lemaine the shoe-mender. At the back of the shop, the yard and shed, an ancient much repaired hand-operated press has been set up and a compositor’s workroom. On the grimy panels of the front door are two placards: ‘Germinal – Editorial – Administrative – Advertising offices’ ‘Soles (heels included): Men (Hobnailed) 3 Francs and 3.25F.; (stitched) 4F.; women: (hobnailed) 2.50F.; (stitched) 3.25F.; fittings guaranteed invisible, 0.30F.’

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<sup>2</sup> Just as each development of Alexandre-Marius Jacob’s extraordinary existence has been scrupulously traced back from witness accounts and documents, the trial’s lines are genuine.

Two advertising notices... 'No more abortions! Scientific and practical means of limiting female fertility, by Doctor Knowlton. Translated from the English by Lennoz. Pamphlet prosecuted and acquitted by the Brabant assizes. Price 0.50F. Apply within.' And the other reads... 'Midwife. Cures all women's complaints. Absolute discretion, receives boarders at any stage of pregnancy. Apply to Mlle. Berthe Leguillier, 388 Route d'Abbeville, Montières. Consultations daily from 1 pm. to 3 pm.' For the anarchists, 60 years or so ahead of their times, are also actively campaigning on behalf of birth control—which brings them plenty of vexations.

By 7 pm., the team, bolstered by a number of persons who have come down from Paris, is in full session, amid the shoes, clogs, awls, gouges, lasts and nails. Feverishly, they set about preparing the special edition which they have resolved to put out just as soon as possible. Pacaud sees to the editorial:

'Rarely will a trial have caused such a sensation... (...) The judiciary, the army and the police are dumbfounded. The defenders of order have been seized by a tremendous funk that shows itself in the grotesque, not to say pointless deployment of manpower (...). The courthouse has been turned into a barracks (...). But disappointment among the bourgeois newspapers, the mouthpieces of middle-class mediocrity, has been great indeed! Good Lord! Sacrosanct property has been attacked. The quivering bourgeois must have visions of looting and riot flashing before their eyes: all because the demonstrations of hate by those who own nothing against a recuperator such as Jacob have ceased. The prejudices that underpinned the old authoritarian society have melted away. Which just goes to show that our propaganda is on the right track!'

Then he takes the jury to task: 'Sometimes, doctors' certificates are convenient.' He breaks down by profession... each profession accompanied by some epithet of his own devising... the 'panel list' from which Jacob's jurors have been chosen by lot.

There is among them, he notes, 'not one worker, not one peasant, not a single proletarian'. How come? Because if justice was just and were Jacob's jury made up of twelve workers, he would necessarily have been acquitted!

What, then, is the difference between the judges and the judged? It is that the thieves are not the ones that are believed to be so!

At the corner of a table, Maurice Lucas is drafting another document in the same vein:

'They have been racking their brains since the start of the investigation to cultivate a mysterious lust for vengeance in the crowd, in the ignoble aim of ensuring that Jacob would be lynched. For the sake of the soundness of its foundations, it was in the interest of society as a whole that some avenging spirit should stir the stupidity of the mob. To meet the requirements of its cause, the people had to anathematise the destroyers of property.

All in vain! Today, for all the tremendous obstacles placed in its way, the people are in contact with these revolutionary heroes! Miscalculation and amazement! The accused are men of mettle! Jacob, Pélissard, Augain, Chalus, Soutarel, Baudy and Charles are educated minds, noble hearts devoted to the cause of humanity.

How could the people's sympathies fail to fly to them, who are going to pay with their lives and their liberty for the tremendous wound they have inflicted upon the butchers of the people?'

Jules Lemaire picks up the baton. He is on edge. Demonstrations of sympathy from the crowd were not enough for him. He had called a meeting of all militants in the region for today: he had been expecting a riot: they had made do with a rendition of the *Internationale*. He looks for, still wishes for a reversal of opinion, a gesture, a backlash, something. But Souvarine, a Russian

émigré who by some miracle escaped the clutches of the Okhrana, is not happy with Lemaire's prose. One does not make revolution with demonstrations, but with bombs.

Souvarine has drawn up a text which, according to him, should override all the rest.

'Even as the dispatches are reporting that in Russia, hordes of muzhiks, starving bands made up of several thousands of peasants in open revolt are roaming the countryside, looting the castles and mansions of the landlords, burning and pillaging with no one capable of opposing them—at this very moment, a sinister comedy is being played out between robbers and robbed in the Amiens courthouse: a comedy that nearly two years have been spent to concoct.

We have to believe that fear is the getting of wisdom, for this time the selection of the jury was not without complications. Nonetheless it is an exceptional delight for twelve who own to sit in judgement of 23 dispossessed. COULD IT BE TRUE, AS IS BEING SAID, THAT JACOB STILL HAS SOME FRIENDS AT LARGE WHO ARE MONITORING THE ACTIONS AND MOVES OF THE JURORS, AND PREPARING TO TAKE REVENGE FOR THEM?

IT WOULD CERTAINLY BE REGRETTABLE TO HAVE TO RESORT TO WEAPONS OF INTIMIDATION LIKE THE BOMB OR THE REVOLVER, but if this salutary fear had the effect of making them reflect, they would at least grasp one self-evident fact: JACOB, BEING AN ANARCHIST, CANNOT BE A LEADER. Whereupon the thesis of a band of malefactors led by him collapses. The fiction maintained by the hireling press caves in.

You have gulled the people long enough: long enough have you managed to induce them to believe the robbed the robber! Today the truth explodes for all to see! The proletariat are awakening, they read, they listen, they reflect, they see clearly. They know that Property is theft.

You have the effrontery to pose as fair-minded men! Craven hypocrites, you well know that there is nothing fair in your stinking society. Your learned men, your professors, your journalists are repeatedly forced to concede that injustice, everything most ghastly in the moral and material sense... these are the rules of your beautiful society of carrion flesh and inverts.

The risen people are expropriating your like in Russia. A new day has dawned at last when there will be no more judges, no more robbed and no more robbers!'

Having perused Souvarine's text one by one, the comrades say nothing. Are they afraid perhaps? Do they fear lest he may go out and down one of these grasping bourgeois? Yet he is ready to do just that! And this very evening if need be. To set an example. To strike terror into the others. Violence is atrocious when it serves the master. But sublime when it serves the free man! Let's go! What is holding them back?

But a man enters the shop, a short, bearded, eagle-eyed man with a hooked nose, dressed almost like a bourgeois alongside the rest. He shakes himself as he removes his rain-soaked mackintosh. His name is Charles Malato. One of Jacob's oldest friends. He made his acquaintance in Marseilles when he was just 17 years old. He himself is aged 40. He is a man who carries some weight, a man that one can tell does not hesitate to lend a hand to the plough if need be. An insurrectionist anarchist. They respect him. He has been out and about making inquiries. He has contacts everywhere, known to him alone. They huddle around him.

'So?'

'So, it's a hell of a mess. The screw who was in with us has been moved to another department. Jacob has been moved to another cell yet again. It's back to scratch again.'

A sympathetic silence greets the news.



Be that as it may, Malato has managed to get hold of a message from Jacob. Jacob thanks them for all they are doing. However he does not think an escape is feasible at present neither in the Bicêtre nor in the courthouse: he is hemmed in by too many soldiers. It would also be madness to attempt to pull something as he is being removed from the van. It only remains to await a favourable opportunity and then to try to cobble something together... One never knows... In any case, Jacob prefers to be guillotined rather than be the cause of any pointless blood-letting: so, he hopes, when his head falls it will bloody the enemy.

They all bow their heads: would they show the same courage in similar circumstances? They have not many chances left to get him out of there.

‘Let’s go to it,’ Malato begins again. ‘In one way he has the finest part. He has conducted himself like a free man. If die he must, he will die like a free man. And then what! At this very moment throughout France, in Paris, in Marseilles, in Lyons, in Perpignan, all of the comrades have their eyes turned to Amiens. We have to live up to expectations. Mustn’t disappoint them.’

‘Here!’ he concludes after a pause. ‘I’ve brought you this. Libertad sent it for you. He had prepared it in advance. It puts things back into perspective. From our point of view, of course. He will release it to the public simultaneously through *Germinal* and *L’Anarchie*.’

Libertad, the redoubtable crutch-borne leading light behind *Causeries du XVIIIe* and who had just founded *L’Anarchie*, a libertarian weekly of the individualist persuasion, is known to all present. Soon, despite himself, he is to be the inspiration of the ‘Bonnot Gang.’

The article is passed from hand to hand. They peruse it. Comment upon it. Gradually life returns and so does a diehard hope.

‘At this very moment,’ Libertad writes, ‘there are two collections of individuals in attendance at Amiens. One seems to have scored a victory: it no longer fights, it merely judges. It has even appointed its delegates who deck themselves out in uniforms and adorn themselves with special names: gendarmes, judges, soldiers, prosecutors, jurors. But they fool nobody. In them one discerns the usual partners of the social struggle: robbers, counterfeiters, murderers, according to the circumstances.’

‘Securely bound, the members of the second gang may be shackled but beaten they are not. And whenever they shake their heads, delegates and onlookers look like taking to their heels.’

‘The folk from the first gang call their operation doing justice and claim to prosecute crime. In any event, it is not remorse that drags their enemies before them, but handcuffs instead.’

‘Whether they be judges, officers of the peace, businessmen, inspectors or administrators, no useful work has ever emanated from the ten fingers of the former. They did not make the bread they eat, nor build the mansions where they live, nor make the garments they wear, nor the vehicles which transport them. So what they live by THEY HAVE STOLEN.’

‘In another society, Jacob and his friends might find useful employment. Their shrewdness, their expertise, their strength and courage are questioned by no one. They began to burgle society in order to live in the... perhaps mistaken... hope that this would cause disruption in the body of society. That was their only fault—if fault they have committed.’

The following day, the crowd control was equally impressive. Before the proceedings commence, Rose, dragging her gendarme behind her, manages to hurl herself into the arms of her lover who squeezes her to himself. Unexpectedly it is decided that the women are to be held apart from him and he is moved back to the fifth row of the accused instead of the second where he spent yesterday. Even so, he blows kisses to his mother and to Rose.

The clerk completes the recitation of the charges whereupon the examination begins immediately:

‘You are a native of Marseilles?’ President Wehekind asks Jacob.

‘Proud of it!’ he answers with a grin, laying the accent on thick.

‘You received good primary schooling.’

‘Free of charge and compulsory. The people were led to believe that it was for their own good and out of a care for social progress that schooling was made compulsory for them. What a lie! It was in order to turn them into learned monkeys, more refined slaves in the bosses’ hands.’

‘I am not asking for your opinion.’

‘You are recounting my life before all and sundry. I have my piece to say.’

‘Then you were a seaman. The references from your officers are generally good.’

‘I’ve seen the world, it wasn’t pretty. Everywhere a handful of malefactors like you exploiting millions of unfortunates.’

Outraged cries from those present. The president of the court raises his gavel. Maître Justal, Jacob’s counsel, leans towards him in an effort to get him to moderate his conduct: his client won’t save his skin with this sort of behaviour.

# The Agitator

## I

The family of his father, who came from Alsace, had emigrated south around 1850 into the Vaucluse first and thence to Marseilles. Joseph Jacob had started out as a cook with a shipping company. He had had to swear never to take ship again when he began to court Marie Berthou, a girl from La Crau: a sailor as a son-in-law was out of the question. In token of his good intentions, he had found a job as a helper in a bakery in the dock area in the Rue Fontaine-Rouvière. Whereupon he was able to take Marie to wife. But a pining for the South seas had begun to gnaw at him in the bakery despite his efforts to rinse it away with alcohol. Pernod sold for 3 *sous* in the bars: now, one never sits down to a drink on one's own and four or five drinking companions meant four or five rounds of drink.

The logical step would doubtless have been to go to sea again. But Joseph was a waverer. For good or ill, a thousand considerations kept him on dry land. He could not leave Marie in the lurch. Could not betray the pledge sealed over a bottle of *vin rosé*. Soon it was a case of not leaving the kid tied to his mother's apron strings.

In point of fact, Marie had money. It was she who would inherit from her parents. Not that they had been very well-to-do. The rent from their holding in La Crau: a bit of a field towards Plan de Cuques: a horse for turning the soil and ferrying produce to market: that was all their earthly possessions. But they had always worked hard, and lived meagrely. They were suspected of having put by a tidy little sum. As for Joseph, he hadn't a single *sou* coming to him.

It was all the easier for him to threaten her that he might go away for ever—and that was a threat from which he did not shrink—than to actually take that chance. As pretty as she was, she would not have had much trouble in finding herself a fancy man. After about a dozen false starts, Joseph wallowed in bitterness and in talk about the sacrifices he had made for her and in the card schools in the corner grog-shop.

She came to despise him. She was suffocating. Wed at the age of 18, she had known no other world outside of the convent, the Sunday vegetables and, from 29 September 1879 (when Alexandre-Marius came into the world), nappies that needed changing and knitting for pin-money. She would never forgive him for the heroic tales of fearless and irreproachable mariners with which he won her over. Divorce: the law as it stood ruled that out to all intents and purposes. Resignation, passivity, stagnation: these were impossible. He had pulled the wool over her eyes. She had bought a pig in a poke. After three years, she had but one desire left: that he might take off, disappear, leave her in peace. Of course, the more she told him this, the more he could discover excuses for hanging around.

One day she jumped the omnibus for Plan de Cuques. She ranted and raved and played the kitten: she inveigled her ageing parents into agreeing to let her have a little from the stack of *louis* upon which they chose to sleep, in order to set up a business. This was a bakery, just 100 metres from the house, right in the middle of the Vieux-Port district, on a little square which lay at the

top of a cobblestone ramp lost amid a warren of alleys. By agreement, the deeds were in her name. Joseph became her hired help: he was the baker's boy, she the cashier. This final degradation he could not forgive. He concocted memories for himself: she set to work. She was the mistress. To reassert his crumbling authority he soon began to thrash her. On the first occasion he begged her forgiveness, weeping like a child. He was full of good resolutions. The weeks passed. Mates sneered at his astounding sobriety. And then, in the final analysis, women are like doormats, there to be walked over.

Alexandre-Marius grew up as best he could between this unsatisfied Amazon of a mother and this emasculated father. He was not really unhappy. Not really a martyred child. The forenames borrowed from the generals of antiquity, in memory of the *Other One*, the true Napoleon who would have spread the Revolution throughout the whole of Europe but for the interference of the Austrians and the British, surely destined him for higher things. On different counts, they both had high hopes of him.

In anticipation of a great future, they put his name down for the Christian Brothers' school. A whim of Joseph's which sat ill with the anti-clericalism which he declared and declaimed between glasses of Pastis and absinthe. But it is possible to be a dyed-in-the-wool socialist and to be concerned for one's children's education: only louts attended the lay school in the district. Marie, who had inherited a scathing opinion of soutane-wearers from her days with the sisters, superciliously gave way to this latest act of renegadeship from her lord and master.

Furthermore, Alexandre never roamed the streets. He was not an 'urchin', as she said. He preferred to make rag dolls with his devilishly agile hands: 'You'll end up as a hairdresser, a girl's job!' Joseph sneered at him one evening.

Whenever his father's cronies would drop by for a drink, Alexandre's greatest pleasure was to listen late on to tales of crossing the line, when the whole crew dresses up as sea-gods, or of exotic ports of call in strange-sounding islands... Java, Borneo, Célèbes, Fiji, Sumbawa—where, inevitably, apocalyptic typhoons blew, while lovely half-breeds devised lascivious belly dances for their exclusive benefit. Marie would shrug her shoulders at such tales, which she knew by heart. But Alexandre would salt away their quasi-epics like so many treasures in his memory where they joined the likes of *Ivanhoe*, *Ulysses*, *Jean Bart* and the bailiff of Suffren.

From the day when he saw his father beat his mother and his yellow animal eyes flame with rage, he despised him. Not that that stopped Marie from contending that her husband was a fine fellow. His temper was short-lived. Once the crisis had passed, he would do anything to please.

She strove in vain to paint him in an enchanting light for Alexandre. Alexandre merely heard her out without a word. By the age of eight, he had a serious look about him, like children who have already seen too much. He would sit on her lap. He would put his arm around her neck. He would hug her. He would tell her how he would carve out an empire for her in China where she would be queen. In China, because missionaries would often arrive to give talks about the 'savages' whom they had brought to knowledge of the Gospel. He had difficulty seeing what benefits the blessed sacraments could have brought the pagan idolaters of Lao-tse, but could talk endlessly about junks, about the Great Wall besieged by the Manchu hordes and about emperors in palanquins. He had built himself a heroic world on the far side of the ocean, where absolute beauty and the radiant perfection of golden days were within reach, contrary to conditions in Marseilles.

'My son's going to be a priest!' ejaculated Joseph one day with his customary delicacy when he stumbled across Alexandre regaling his mother with twaddle of this sort.

Priest he never dreamed of becoming. A missionary rather: on account of the travel. Anyway, his vocation dried up at the time of his first communion. That morning, in a provocative act and persuaded that a formidable hand was about to descend upon the back of his neck to the accompaniment of a roll of thunder, he bit down on the host. His disappointment was beyond measure: God did not intervene. So he did not exist. The Brothers had been telling lies. The matter was settled once and for all: he had no supernatural soul. His mind turned more towards action—which did not rule out reflection—than contemplation.

At the age of eleven and a half, he was awarded special permission to sit his school certificate which he sailed through. His teachers vaguely expected that he would carry on for his diploma, perhaps even take his baccalaureate. They confided as much to Marie. Alas! Joseph went on a real binge. Every other batch was burned. Customers became rare. Money even rarer. This business of studies was doubtless yet another ploy by the Christian Brothers to recruit a long-stay customer and to grow fat on the backs of the poor. Marie, who never failed to caw like a crow whenever she came across a priest in the street was quick to credit them with the most Machiavellian intentions. In vain did they refer to the little seminary's having no fees; she distrusted them. As for the obligation to attend school up to the age of 13, the law that had just been passed to that effect in 1883 remained, for the moment, a dead letter.

Consulted by Marie, Alexandre blushed. The insult hurled by his father still had him seething. Seminary school... that meant becoming a priest: akin to becoming an ox. Given his air of discomfiture, she did not press the matter. In those days that stratum of society had not yet been touched by the craze for Great Schools. As long as one can read, write and reckon one can always get by, provided that one is dependable. Diplomas are all very well for the offspring of the rich. One argument clinched the decision: a neighbour woman's son who had passed his baccalaureate was unemployed.

Upon hearing the news Alexandre was relieved, just as any other child would have been in his place. Though an excellent student, he was too bored in class. The Masses every morning, the catechism lessons, the saints lives overwhelmed him with disgust. For three months the weeks simply dragged by. He discovered Jules Verne and dockland. Dockland and Jules Verne, tirelessly: the 15-year old Captain, the Children of Captain Grant and Captain Nemo... he was surely going to bump into them in the Canebière, on the Canal quay or out towards the La Joliette dock, ready to take ship for some fabulous expedition. What Pierre Loti calls the 'call of the wide open spaces'.

Thus when, one day, he caught sight of a suitcase-laden officer coming down the gangway of a freighter, he rushed to give him a helping hand. The man, in the belief that this was some down-and-out he was dealing with, made to give him a tip at the end of the trip. Alexandre refused it, his pride injured. Amused, the officer put some questions to him. Spluttering, Alexandre confessed his ambition:

'Ah! So you want to be a sailor?' said the officer, patting him on the cheek. 'Then come see me at the Freycinet's one of these days. You must ask for Monsieur Martinaud, armoury captain.'

He was dazzled. One of the most joyous experiences of his life.

Breathlessly, he raced off to report his providential meeting. His mother began by squeezing him to her, sobbing... just like some bitch about to lose her pup. His father on the other hand congratulated him, tottering, and made him toast the prospect with a glass of wine. Freycinet was one of the biggest companies along with the Transatlantique line. And this Martinaud was a very fine sort. He had heard tell of him. A trip around the world is the university of life. Alexandre was going to see the Southern Cross and emerge from under his mother's apron at last. Marie

argued as best she could. Be it now or later, he would leave somehow; that was fate. He would see the landscapes of which she had dreamed. He would not be like her and go stale waiting for Sundays to arrive. Perhaps it was as well.

Three weeks later, on 22 February 1890 to be exact, at the age of eleven years and five months, set sail as a ship's boy aboard the *Thibet*; thrust into the bottom of his new kitbag as his only viaticum, were the works of Jules Verne that had brought him to that place. Without a doubt, he was going to seize the tiller in the midst of storms and, thanks to the daring of his resolve, to rescue crews in peril. Such dreams were to be dashed.

He had to rise at 4.00 am. Swab the deck with huge pails of water and scrub it with a brush. There was the deckhouse to be swept out, bunks to be made, brass to be polished, sewing to be done, officers to be served, and the fearsome invective of the ship's mate and bosun to be braved. Jules Verne had not told the whole story.

He had left out the mops, the needle and the tea-towels, the aching muscles, the vomiting, the despair, the filth of the crew's quarters, the aimless wandering from port to port, while the seamen got drunk with loose women in sordid grog-houses.

The more deeply he got into the life, the more the aura of the exotic faded away with each time they put ashore along the African coastline. Oran, followed by Dakar, Conakry, Monrovia, Tabu, Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou... single-storied huts, overcast skies, humidity. Scrofulous, club-footed, grinning, grimacing, eaten by flies: officers with switches smacking their boots: arrogant, bloated, good-for-nothing civilians. No tigers, no lions, no hippopotamuses: no chance to display one's heroism. The clouds over Africa were the same as the ones that hung over Marseilles in winter. The stench, the sweat, the ugliness: maybe Alexandre was not the stuff of which poets are made. But nor was he a first-class passenger aboard some liner.

After three consecutive journeys aboard the *Thibet*, he now saw his father in his true light: a bar-room raconteur, a grog-shop braggart. There was no truth in any of the things he had said.

At the age of twelve, he began to come alive to his responsibility as the head of the household: he realised that in a way his mother had determined that he should live life for them both. That he would do what she had never dared do, because of her womanhood, and never been able to do, for want of opportunity. Housebound, she shared, at every port of call, his amazement, joy, resentment, suffering and judgement. She demanded but one undertaking of him: that he follow the prompting of his heart, not the calculation of his interest. An old hangover from Catholicism, no doubt.

When he learned that the bakery was mortgaged down to the last baking-tray on account of the batches ruined through his father's drinking bouts, he made up his mind to look out for Marie. From then on he would eke out every *sou* of his pay so as to take back the greatest possible sum to her.

This he did from the moment he transferred to the *Messageries Maritimes* line where his good references earned him a place aboard the *Ville de la Ciotat* as a trainee helmsman on 45 francs a month. To him that was a fortune. To Marie, it was worth all the nuggets in California, for quite apart from the fact that these tiny sums helped to restore the balance of her hugely overspent budget, she saw them as a token of priceless filial love.

Egypt, the Suez Canal and its caravans of camels, Djibouti, the Red Sea, the Seychelles, Sydney and its pink granite rocks, where he saw his first convicts, escapees whom they had to ferry back, ankles shackled deep in the hold, to Nouméa. Alexandre wanted a close look at them. He passed them tobacco. Got to talk with them. They were not wild beasts: unfortunates, rather. At least

so they seemed to him. Criminals to be sure. But were not those who, from the comfort of their offices, reduced human beings to such abject degradation criminals also? When he got home, Marie was quite of this opinion.

It was there, on Nou island, that he chanced to hear a reference to Louise Michel. A horribly ugly old girl, completely crazy, a *pétroleuse* from the Commune, who had been amnestied back in 1880 because Victor Hugo had written some poems about her. During her time of servitude, she had conceived the ludicrous notion of setting up schools for the Kanaks out in the bush. By then some of these savages had achieved baccalaureate level. An abomination: for, inevitably these people, equipped with their new and laughably useless knowledge, were going to question the white man's orders. A funny sort of a woman. Pity she was an anarchist. Marie might be entitled to a report about this as well. On the subject of anarchy she embroidered with thread a golden legend of unselfishness, liberty and fraternity, which Joseph came along and spoiled with his slurred assertions that folk who drink only water are not to be trusted.

Alexandre left the *Ville de la Ciotat* for the *Alix*. Off the Syrian coast, the *Alix* was holed by a freighter and sank. The whole crew was saved, including the apprentice, who had not had time to feel afraid. What struck him most about the episode was a bonus of 250 francs. For Marie, of course. After that, it was the *Suzanne-et-Marie*. But not for long. Indeed Jules Verne had overlooked one other essential feature of shipboard life. At no time had the prim novelist dwelt upon the morals of sailors. Now some of these had an infuriating tendency to confuse the apprentice's part to that of the object of their sexual desires. Bad enough to slave day and night, to be treated as a greenhorn or poet because you get bored when they force you to stand watch with them and it reminds you too much of your father's drunken stupors, but to be harassed by some wine-sodden deckhand feeling horny... there was nothing romantic about that.

The first serious row to erupt over this came when they were at anchor in Saint-Louis du Rhône. Alexandre resisted. The amateur invert swung a punch at him. Alexandre pounced on him and suffered the public humiliation of defeat. He resolved to be avenged, clambered on to the roof of a shed and lay in wait for his tormentor, clutching a cobblestone. By some stroke of good luck, the target failed to show. His honour was safe. But the episode cost him his job. He had his work cut out to restrain Marie from heading out to avenge him.

In any case, Marie had plenty on her plate. Her pleading and cajoling had succeeded in extracting a further sum of money from her parents—her last. Some weeks later, old man Berthou passed away. His true financial state came to light when the grandmother, capable of working the land alone, was obliged to rent it out and resort to a costermonger's barrow. Marie was desolated by this: her debts had been cleared completely, the bakery sold off and a grocery-hardware shop purchased in the rue Dragon: but here was her mother parading the streets like some down and out. 'The young with the young, the old with the old,' Mama Berthou obstinately used to say, not being fond of her son-in-law, whenever her daughter besought her to move in with them.

Alexandre was entitled to inspect and be shown around the new premises. It occurred to him that, with no more dough to knead, his father would be less of a daunting prospect to customers among the green beans and vegetables. As for himself, this was not for him: it would undoubtedly be a delicate task to coexist with Papa Jacob.

So he set off again. Aboard the *Armand-Béhic* this time. During a further outward journey to Australia, the attempts at sodomy began again. Should he complain to the captain? That sort of carry-on was so commonplace in those days that most of the officers preferred to turn a blind eye to it. It was looked upon as a very natural small service to do one's elders. In all honesty, the

men could not comprehend Alexandre's refusal to join in their little games. They thought him a bit of a wally. Shipboard life became hell. He was forced into the worst drudgery. In Sydney, on an impulse and with two *sous* in his pocket, he jumped ship. He was thirteen years old. Any lingering romantic illusions died right there.

He lived by his wits, bought an apple, sold whips (the first was filched from a cabby), shone shoes, kept seals, up to the day he met up with a compatriot who suggested that he sign on with a whaling ship. Whaling. Enthusiastically he boarded his new ship. The crew members had the look of pirates about them. The captain was black and built like Hercules. All of their faces struck him as admirable adventurers' faces.

A month passed: no whales. Instead, one day a small ship appeared on the skyline. Alexandre was sent below to fetch some spars. The hatch cover was battered down after him and sealed. He could hear the captain's voice promising that he would be released from there in an hour or two. Then strange noises reached him in his hiding place, loud shouts followed by what sounded like shots. Then nothing.

The hatch cover was thrown back. He climbed on to the deck.

His fellow crew members were wielding rifles. The vessel opposite was deserted. Or rather there was someone; bodies sprawled in weird positions as if fast asleep. Corpses. The whaler was a pirate ship. At last Alexandre was caught up in the Adventure (with a capital A) promised him by Jules Verne: chance had made him into a buccaneer.

Not having been present during the carnage, he was not shocked by the dead to begin with. That was all abstract, confused, exciting. Moreover he was not given time to reflect upon his state of mind: there was cargo to be transhipped. That done, a barrel of gunpowder was placed aboard the other ship. A man lit the fuse, they scurried away and there was an explosion. A very fine fireworks display.

This expedition brought him a small fortune: 800 francs which he sent off immediately to Marie with a letter eulogising his 'new trade', certain aspects of which he nonetheless felt he had an obligation to keep quiet about.

On their next sortie, the pirates, reckoning that he was enough of a veteran, let him witness the whole operation. The unsuspecting approach of the prey, the frantic waving, the cries as if appealing for help and then... suddenly... the rifles, the dumbfounded expressions of the victims, and the bloodshed. This time, Alexandre began to throw up. The novelists had forgotten to mention the spurting blood, the death throes, the grimaces, the screams, the terror of the wounded dispatched at point-blank range. He pocketed his portion of the loot, 1000 francs, for his mother's sake, then took to his heels just as soon as the whaler made port. He had understood. Crime did pay. Paid well indeed. But it was ghastly.

Eight hours later, the whaler, caught in *flagrante delicto* was arrested by a coastguard vessel and the entire crew was strung up unceremoniously. Had he been on board he would not have been spared the slaughter: the laws of the sea allowed no trifling with piracy. For a time, his nights were haunted by nightmares during which huge blacks chased him in order to put a noose around his neck. These cold sweats were a lesson to him: henceforth he might speak knowledgeably of piracy to his erstwhile chums from the Christian Brothers' school—but he would have no more truck with it, ever.

A vacancy for a ship's boy aboard an English ship, the *Prince of Albert* enables him to make it home to Marseilles by way of Liverpool. In Marseilles the gendarmes were waiting for him: he had deserted after all. In short, knowing nothing of his Australian adventures, they threw him



into jail for having refused to submit to buggery. Alexandre was livid. His mother calmed him: to be sure, he was, basically, right, but unless deserters faced punishment, how many ships might never set sail from Tahiti? And then he was to face judgement for his escapade. This was no time for a revolt which would necessarily be taken for insubordination. He had to get out of this fix.

She moved heaven and earth. She produced references from the successive masters who had her son under their command. She stressed his age: at the age of thirteen, one doesn't realise what one is doing. Surely they were not going to destroy his career! Alexandre's clear and lively answers to the court made a favourable impression on the judges. They made him swear on his honour as a seaman that he would not appear before them again, and were willing to let bygones be bygones.

He was touched by this humane justice, so different from the atmosphere which had prevailed aboard the *Armand-Béhic*. The generous comments of the officers moved him to tears: he was weeping as he left the courtroom. He would not let these men down. They had placed their trust in him: he would be deserving of it. One day, he pledged, he would wear a braided cap.

Opting for boldness, off he went to seek out Captain Martinaud again. He confided in the captain his misadventure as well as the quite new ambition he was cherishing. The officer heard him out gravely and with him explored... 'the chances of a sailor devoid of theoretical background achieving his master's ticket in the long run'; he sounded his sincerity and made no secret to him of the enormous, thankless and burdensome task that lay ahead of him and for which, saving his being in a position to pay his way, he would not enjoy the benefits of the competitiveness that prevailed in the training schools. Alexandre had an answer for everything. Martinaud, defeated, lent him his navigation and hydrography manuals.

For the ensuing four years' sailing, his watch completed and regardless of the hour of day or night, while the other sailors grunted over card-games barely a metre away from him, he sat with his head between his hands: and clapped them over his ears, the better to digest the indigestible treatises. Currents, soundings, tides, signals, buoys intoxicated him as Jules Verne had once done. Beyond it all lay salvation: life as a proud and upright free man.

Most of the officers helped him out with advice. Truth to tell, they adored him. Some of his shipmates, on the other hand, took a dislike to him: he was aiming to rise above them. He hobnobbed with the 'petty officers'; so he was a bootlicker. The deciphering of letters and lines struck them as a magical preserve of the officers' wardroom, to which a mere novice could not aspire without sacrilege. Constantly he had to watch his language, lest he utter words that they would not be familiar with. Moreover, he hardly ever went ashore. He did not drink; did not smoke; did not gamble; did not disport himself with dockside whores. His seeming Puritanism, which was nothing more than a distaste for vice observed at too close quarters at home, irked them as if they were being taken personally to task.

He did not balk at work: he helped people out whenever he was able: in the event of a brawl he always took his mates' part against the *pacha* (skipper): he used to organise their affairs: would write on their behalf to a girlfriend or wife: he was loyal, courageous and, on occasion, could share a joke but was ready to kill too, if anyone rode roughshod over him. In short, he had to be accepted for what he was: a weird, candid lad: compassionate yet violent: unselfish and quick-tempered; a fine sailor, but as ingenuous as a child. Beyond reproach: that was the exasperating and disarming thing about him.

Each time he came home, Marie could see a change in her son. He was maturing. Turning into a man. She encouraged him along the course he had chosen—annoyed only that she could not be of more help to him: but inevitably she had slipped into debt again.

Single-mindedly, he was forging the weapons that would enable him truly to escape, and not in daydreams only, from the prison of the crew's quarters: the lever with which he would shift the world. He learned a still greater store of things about men. How, aboard certain vessels, during the crossing for example, officers and men conspired to replace a portion of the cargo by an equivalent weight of pieces of coke. Once the merchandise had been delivered to the wharves, the owners lost their right to raise any more complaints: any casual passer-by might have been responsible for the pilferage. There was a certain kick to be had out of pulling a fast one on such a businessman who already had millions. But the hypocrisy, the cowardice, and the guile which surrounded the coup revolted him. The whaling ship's buccaneers had at least had the gumption to risk their necks.

He also came upon a veritable trade in human livestock. Jews, Greeks, Armenians took ship in Beirut, Salonika or Batum, and were herded into steerage, crowded together, packed like sardines, humiliated, their only offence their poverty, abused, exploited, but still happy to be there as the chosen candidate of some family, clan or tribe that had collected its pennies to buy them a passage to the El Dorado of America. And the trade in blacks, a trade established by the Sultan of Zanzibar in person for the benefit of the potentates of the Middle East, and which was to survive for a long time, tolerated by the British occupiers who creamed off a percentage, and was organised by a Jewish baron by the name of Hirsch who made a fortune out of it... a trade practised by France herself in that the *Guadiana* on board which Alexandre was serving, incontestably flew the tricolour. And France, as everybody knew, abandoned Zanzibar to the British only in exchange for a free hand in Madagascar.

He experienced shame, despair, and rancour. Hatred... one frosty evening in London where the bosun, to revenge himself upon this indomitable adolescent who had the effrontery to have a mind of his own, who dared refuse to conform to the sexual practices had sent him out to rub down the mizzen-mast with a sponge stuck fast in a pail of frozen water: and it was only the cold that set Alexandre's hand trembling that saved the bosun from being struck full on the head by the sharp edged chamber-pot that he flung at him from his perch.

At the age of fourteen, he made the acquaintance of the female sex in the person of a Creole hostess in Sourabaya who relieved him of his savings. He knew others, in Amsterdam, in Caracas, in Tamatave, all of them built along similar lines, three francs for a 'quickie', some jiggery-pokery, a cure against nostalgia, a trip to the edge of disillusionment. He was after a heart, they were after some sous. They breathed France from his torso, dreaming of ransom amid rum-flavoured hiccups: they would tell their stories, their interchangeable, pitiful and untruthful stories, grinning with distress, all crocodile tears, with their blotchy cheeks made sooty by Khôl. Every time these dull-witted, mechanical bitches made him want to slap the face of the shipowner's crinolined wife whom he had sighted one day quite by chance behind the dockside railway station, her and her angelic smile, in her cabriolet. Why? That was something he did not understand himself.

He loathed the fool's bargains sealed behind closed doors, the casual copulation, the fiasco of bought embraces, the spinelessness of knife fights when drink had been taken, when eyes were bloodshot and one had bemoaned one's coauthored downfall. His father had furnished him with a model for all failures, all cowardice. As time went by he espied them in others and despised

them. What would he do once he had obtained his captain's ticket? He did not know. Only one thing was certain: things would not be the same aboard *his* vessel.

In the vast shambles that was society, with its bloated traffickers of ebony on the one hand, and its deckhands, brutalised by toil, resigned, furtive, embittered, beaten, spent and alcoholic on the other: for the sake of a shipowner's wife and of regiments of whores.. and unless women had had the good fortune to be born into the fancy homes on the Canebière, their mangy self respect vegetated, as his mother's did, in the dungeons of matrimony... the tiny, undying spark that kept him moored for a long time to the common code of morality was this hope of some day attaining officer status.

But his lever—his physical wellbeing—let him down. In Dakar he had caught 'the fevers'. Which fevers? No one knows. Over sleepless nights, the first virus to attack seized a hold of him. Throughout the entire return trip he was unable to stand his watch. When the bell sounded the hour, he would stumble in vain towards the wheel-house, his lungs rent by a severe coughing: they had to ferry him back to his bunk.

He was put ashore in Marseilles on a stretcher, more dead than alive. An urgently summoned specialist shook his head pessimistically. If he came through this, which was far from certain, he would in any case be left with precarious health. Resumption of his seaman's trade was out of the question. With two off-hand remarks, the man of science shattered four years of dogged determination and quiet heroism in the obtuse and milling solitude of the crew's quarters. The physician asked 10 francs of Marie by way of consultation fee.

## II

—'You were first condemned on 13 October 1897 to six months' imprisonment and a 50 franc fine for manufacturing explosives. You were 17 years old at the time.'

—'A youthful error, believe me. My bombs were laughable attempts to destroy a band of malefactors whose power I did not suspect!'

His eyes deep-set beneath his bushy eyebrows, the thinning, skeletal figure fought the malaria attacks for a long while. He was delirious. It muttered and growled inside him, as if he had trouble digesting his trials, a mishmash of confused and contradictory demands in search of some unknown outcome. In the end the will to live won through. He emerged from the ordeal almost as if purified, whittled down to the essentials—but seized by a breathtaking feeling of emptiness. The world of his dreams had collapsed. His past doggedness seemed laughable.

However, he was not of a temperament to rewrite history: if only his father had not been a sot,—if only he had the money at home to enable him to pursue his education,—if only he had not worked so hard,—all of these *ifs* amounted to nothing.

Though who can say by what aberration, Joseph Jacob had been appointed as surrogate guardian of a distant cousin who had been left an orphan. For the time being the young man was lodging in a tiny room available on the same landing as Alexandre's room. He came to visit the convalescent. He was a huge, bearded, shy fellow who rocked from one foot to the other while he spoke. In short order he demonstrated to the crestfallen sailor that:

1. Man is an atom in infinity. Governed by the laws that order the world. One of these laws makes him the product of the social setting in which he is placed.

2. He, Alexandre Jacob, had been obliged to overtax himself in order to escape slavery and in an attempt to win a decent social position because others had everything handed to them at birth. The true cause of his ailment was no microbe, but society's despicable organisation. It was injustice that had reduced him to the state of least physical resistance.
3. In circumstances like his, some people, most, simply gave up or gave way to vice. Joseph Jacob exemplified these. Others, a few, used adversity to gain internal freedom which was not a universal gift but the outcome of patient endeavour.
4. His adventure was merely an insignificant episode, a laughably banal anecdote in the titanic contest which pitted the propertied against the propertyless, the exploiters and the exploited in every civilised country.
5. Alexandre, obsessed with making a career was unwittingly in jeopardy of taking a wrong turn. So these fevers were a godsend. Maybe they had prevented his becoming a dealer, a millionaire, one of industry's sharks, a knight of finance, a slaver, a tapioca king, a monarch of gold or tin. As long as *all* men were not free and equal, no man could claim to be so except at the expense of someone else.
6. The only task worthy of man was working to change society. In working to free one's fellow men, and only thus, could one free oneself.

To lend his argument greater weight, the youthful libertarian left him alone with a book by Victor Hugo, one of his bedside favourites, which he regarded as truly revolutionary despite some regrettable passages on Catholic morality ...[*Seventeen*] *ninety-three*.

The impact of Alexandre's encounter with Hugo was devastating. Verne had sent him off in search of the Holy Grail in the direction of an endlessly retreating elsewhere. The mirages of the exotic having faded away, he discovered the chance to create the absolute in the here and now. For Alexandre, Cimourdain's final exchange with Gauvain in the cells, two paces from the guillotine where the former (a pupil become master) is about to extinguish the latter, was a revelation... 'you want compulsory military service. Against whom? Against other men. Me, I want no military service. I want peace. You want help for the poor whereas I want to see poverty abolished. You want proportional taxation. I want no taxes at all. I want social expenditure trimmed to the very bone and paid out of society's surplus value (...) First, away with parasitism, THE PARASITISM OF THE PRIEST, THE PARASITISM OF THE JUDGE, THE PARASITISM OF THE SOLDIER (...) Let every man have a plot of land, and every plot of land its man. You will increase social output a hundredfold. At present, France affords her peasants only four meat days a year; properly cultivated, she would feed 300 million men, the whole of Europe.(...) You want the barrack made compulsory, I the school. You dream of man the soldier, I of man the citizen.'

Those words of Cimourdain's were engraved on his heart. So one had to act. But was Cimourdain a utopian? No. He himself had said it: to achieve the possible one has to... 'start by not rendering it impossible'.

But hadn't Cimourdain perished, a victim of the order established by the Robespierres and the Gauvains? No matter. Others would pick up—others had picked up the torch. He was going to pick it up himself. If need be, he would perish too, eyes open beneath Monsieur Guillotin's blade. He forswore his life in advance. Where? When? How to go about it?

It was quite simple. As soon as he was up and about again, his young neighbour dragged him into the backroom of the Noailles pub where the *Rénovateurs* group, having learned that the local socialists were due to hold a conference, had decided to show up to argue them down.

Several hundred people were standing around, huddled around a makeshift rostrum to which the speaker clung: the air was stifling. From time to time squalls of exclamations burst from the huddle, drowning the speaker's voice with a rumpus that defied description. Whereupon the meeting degenerated into heated private arguments until, slowly, a semblance of calm returned.

After a moment of hesitation, the two young men wove their way, the one steering the other, as far as a compact group at the foot of the platform. There were handshakes, words exchanged. Inquisitively, Alexandre observed those around him. They were workmen, artisans in blue smocks, in overalls, in pea jackets, sometimes with broad red carpenters' belts around their middles. Under a forest of hirsute manes, beards and moustaches, the angry faces strained towards the speaker, all boiling with shared fury. Terms of abuse welled up from the group.

'Sellout! Nark! Forty sous!'

Among them were 5 or 6 women, not good-looking but dressed any old how. Except for one who is standing apart seeming not to know anybody, in a light dress cut high upon a pale skin, with a veiled bonnet. To his eyes she had the look of a princess who had strayed into the crowd. Pressed, despite his efforts, against her back he breathed her intoxicating perfume. Curly black tresses cascaded over the nape of her neck. She was wasp-waisted. He was getting warm. She did not resemble any of the women he had had dealings with. Nor any of the hussies from the brothels overseas. Nor Rolande, daughter of the post office clerk who lived beside the house, with her provocative laughter and teasing smiles when they had walked on Sundays on several occasions during his all too short visits to Marseilles, under the melting eyes of their two families. The woman turned. For some seconds, she pierced him with a serious, fiery and oddly imploring look. Alexandre was deaf to the racket all around him. In a stupor, open-mouthed, he wallowed in her charm. He was going to speak to her, to say something, anything. He melted into a sensation of wellbeing: he floated. He was an omnipotent giant. He was going to enfold her in his arms: to protect her from danger... But she blushed, the shadow of a smile brushed her pale lips and she wandered off a little, unnerved by the stare of this adolescent who was gazing at her so impudently.

Alexandre made the tiniest move to draw closer to her. Shoulders intervened. The crowd was milling around. One of the bearded men leapt on to the rostrum, jostled the speaker and began to declaim, leaning forward, the veins in his forehead and throat protruding, his arms gesticulating level with his knees, his fingers locked, clenched in awful suffering, a despairing attempt to shower the crowd with the immense, fragile and tottering mass of electrifying truths.

'Savings banks putting up the money for workers' houses—to hell with it! The fight against alcoholism... to hell with it! The eight hour day... to hell with it! That's Christian charity! Alms! Paternalism! We want no part of it! Comrade Rostand tries to lull us with fine promises! We want no alms! We want our due! We want an end to slavery! We want freedom! We want immediate social revolution!'

A dull murmur rises from the back of the room and enters the ranks like a wedge into a beech tree: 'Kill him! Provocateur! Let Rostand speak!' The group of bearded ones strikes up the *Internationale*. A stool crashes down upon someone's head. A clearing appears at the foot of the rostrum, like some miniature arena. For a moment, silence interrupts the whistling. Then Alexandre spotted her, cowering in the front row, her hand clutching a lace handkerchief in front

of her mouth. She wanted to get away. Could not. The wall of brawlers pushed her back. He threw himself in front of her. Coshes, which had appeared as if by some miracle, were slashing away at random: chairs were being smashed up: there was a flurry of fists and feet striking home. Some shrill whistle blasts rang out in the street. Then it was as if the huge hanging chandelier was coming down on her. He reached out towards her. He thought he heard a terrified scream.

That was all he saw of his first political meeting. He never did find out who had struck him. The police stepped in, batoning everyone in their path—but mostly the bearded ones. The young orphan, assisted by three comrades, managed to beat a retreat with him in the direction of the office. They made their escape via a garden. They scaled a wall and took him home covered in blood. Wincing with the pain, he asked what had become of the veiled woman. Tiny brunette with a good bust? No, they did not know... They hadn't noticed. So many people there...

The upshot was that he was laid up in bed for a further week. His lips, his forehead and his cheeks turned black and blue. He had difficulty breathing. But no bones were broken. A flood of caresses, reproaches, sweets, infusions and damp compresses from Marie indicated how frightened she had been by the sight of him in a coma. Joseph, secretly proud, perhaps, passed no comment.

For all his aches and pains, Alexandre was swimming in joy: he was nearly Cimourdain. The Gauvains had downed him—but a lost battle did not mean a lost war. He would have his revenge. Slipping abruptly and without transition from ecstasy into the darkest depression, he wondered mostly whether he had cut a heroic figure in the view of the veiled woman, or whether she had not regarded him as a hopeless runt instead. That question, to which no one could supply the answer, haunted him.

A few nights after the incident, the orphan hastily gathered his things together and surreptitiously slipped away: somebody, he knew not who, had reported him as a dangerous ringleader. He headed for Lyons where he had a hideout. He left Alexandre his books. He also requested that Alexandre go, on his behalf, to the Juge printworks in the rue de la République, almost on the corner of the boulevard des Dames, to warn them that he would not be returning.

Alexandre went there. The first person he spotted upon going inside was one of the men who had pulled him out of the fix in the Noailles hostelry, a man by the name of Arthur Roques. Or to be more exact it was the latter, a greying, muscular forty year old who recognised him and warmly shook his hand. Juge, the boss, a gruff, ringing voiced burly type with continually watery eyes, thought that this messenger wanted to step into the shoes of the fugitive. That notion had not even crossed Alexandre's mind. But it caught his fancy. And then there was Roques. And so it came to pass that he found himself as a compositor's apprentice.

Into this new calling he poured the same enthusiasm for work done properly that he had displayed in his days as a sailor, and the same intelligence too. It was in his blood. Descended from countless generations of industrious folk, not counting his father, he had an innate respect for *expertise*. Monsieur Juge was happy with his new employee and Alexandre with his new job.

Whereas, not having the time, he could not perhaps become *Gavot*, the dutiful companion of liberty, he was at heart in favour of that *functional* freemasonry which also acknowledged—and still does acknowledge—the three symbolic points.

1897 had arrived. The industrial revolution was spreading with the rash of mines, foundries and railways, congregating a rootless proletariat into the huge factories of dingy suburbs. It had been masons, carpenters, locksmiths, shipwrights, roofers, plasterers, *loups*, *passants* and *dévorants* who proclaimed themselves the sons of *Hiram*, the inspired architect of Solomon's

Temple, the *Children of Master Jacques* or of *Father Soubise*, the Gallic companions of Hiram who, tradition had it, had gone home bringing the *Secrets* with them. Hitherto, each worker had seemed irreplaceable, initiated patiently over the five years of his *Tour de France* up to the day when his *masterpiece* bore witness to his *expertise*, thereby gaining him admission to the rank of *companion*. And the masterpiece itself was merely the token of a perfect inner accomplishment, mastery of self as much as of the tools of the craft, a slow maturing into wisdom, proof that man might make himself through the making of his art.

Like some unique bloom, each individual had been tended by the Companionship. Industry tied men to the machine. It belittled them. Made them much of a muchness. It replaced love of craft by the notion of productivity. Aside from the bourgeois and entrepreneurs responsible for this equality of brutalisation, this brotherhood of dross, the freedom of the slave in his chains—it was against industry that the anarchists took up arms: the apprenticed Jacob accepted the orders of Monsieur Juge in a natural way, and it did not cost him a thought, because he may have been a boss, but he was primarily a *master*. In the libertarian's New World also there would be apprentices, companions and masters—provided of course that the latter did not abuse their abilities.

What there would not be, however, were these submissive regiments of sub-humans turned into automata by the phenomenon of huge capitalist property. Alexandre—and this was the subject of his earliest discussions with Roques—did not even understand how one might consent to prostitute oneself in a factory. When one did not have the good fortune to be in a position to practise one of the rare trades which had remained 'noble', such as typography, one had to rebel or perish on the spot. On the day when the numbers of the rebels would be sufficient, the social Revolution might at last proceed. With that in mind, perhaps it was to be hoped that the workers be exploited a little more still: in the end, the spark would catch... This is why he remained quite indifferent to the endeavour of men such as Fernand Pelloutier who, with an eye to spreading libertarian ideas among the masses, were turning their attention to syndicalism.

Two years previously in 1895 Pelloutier had just been elected secretary of the Federation of *Bourses du Travail*, the most powerful congregation of corporate bodies then in existence. That same year, unspectacularly, the CGT had been set up in Limoges. Hard-liners had pounced upon it. They had won a majority within it. At the level of the workplace, they had launched the slogans of *boycott* and *sabotage* in the hope that the phenomenon would spread like wildfire. According to them, the general insurrectionary strike, during which the authorities would collapse of themselves like rotten fruit, would automatically erupt... But the great day was slow in coming. Each year it was awaited in vain, every May Day. Apropos of this, Alexandre was deeply impressed by a paradox by Paraf-Javal in *Le Libertaire*: 'What is a syndicate? A grouping in which the brutalised band together by trade in an attempt to make the relations between bosses and workers less unbearable. There are two possibilities: either they are unsuccessful in which case the syndicalist endeavour is futile: or they succeed, in which case the syndicalist endeavour is harmful in that a group of men will have made the situation less unbearable and consequently will have extended the life-span of *contemporary society*.'

Guided by Roques, he gradually discovered libertarian circles in Marseilles and throughout the region. He had access to the editors of *L'Agitateur* at 22, Quai du Port, where everything was hatched. He took part in the gatherings of the *Rénovateurs* in the Flory bar at 69 allée des Capucines: in the meetings of the *Vengeurs* in the Place Saint-Martin at the 'Rendezvous dauphinois'; in those of the *Jeunesse Révolutionnaire* and of the *Libertaires de la Belle de Mai* at the Briant cafe

at 80 rue Blanc in the back-room, behind closed shutters. He frequented the 'Taverne provençal' in the rue Rameau, behind the Grand Théâtre: the 'Bar du Grand Orient', up until there was a falling-out with the owner, and the 'Brasserie du Midi' at 10, Quai du Port. He helped steward the great meetings for which the Chave theatre was hired. He was there for the one held by Sébastien Faure, when a brawl provoked by a nark by name of Camau, had erupted. 'The apostle' had been sentenced to a month in prison for having taken a swing at a certain Monsieur Toyrrion, another notorious informer.

He improvised poems at 'family evenings' at which the libertarians would get together with their spouses and children to listen to talks, to hold discussions, sing revolutionary songs and, on occasions, to dance. One evening he brought along Rolande, the daughter of the post-office clerk, their neighbour. But Rolande was very standoffish, pronounced the people there 'a motley crew' and wanted to go home very early on, thereby introducing a chill to their relationship. In any case, he hardly had any time to see her any more.

Marie, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed herself on the two or three occasions that she attended. Whereas she did not understand much of the political argument she danced the Boston with several comrades whom she found 'very likeable'. They laughed all the time. And, above all, drank nothing but water.

One Sunday Alexandre accompanied Roques to Toulon where he was due to contact the *Révolution des Travailleurs* which met sometimes at Caneppe's at 23 rue Alezard and sometimes at the 'Bar des Artistes' in the place Maurice in the Chapeau-Rouge district. He handled liaison several times with the *Libertaires du Vancluse* in Avignon at the Laguir cafe in the Porte Saint-Roch, or at the Champ-Fleuri cafe behind the railroad freight yard,—and with the *Jeunesse libertaire* in the L'Aveyron refreshment rooms in the rue des Carmes. His feelers reached as far as the *Indomptables* at the San Pareil bar at 3 rue des Petits-Ponts in La Ciotat and indeed as far as Béziers, to the Fourastié cafe at 6 place du Marché where he rendezvoused with local militants.

At *L'Agitateur* he mucked in. He spent sleepless nights, ignoring the recommendations of the doctors, helping to set type for the paper. Sometimes he brought the still damp-inked copies himself to the newsstands of Marius Gauchon and Madame Dumont. He handed out leaflets outside offices. And on Sunday mornings, at the entrances to the churches he would distribute Sébastien Faure's pamphlet *God's Crimes*: 'Straighten yourself up man! And once upright, quivering and rebellious, declare war without quarter on the God whose brutalising veneration has so long been imposed upon your brethren and yourself!'

During masses, he let off stink bombs just as the priest mounted the pulpit: what a show to see these holy Joes at last getting a whiff of the stench of their sins!

He made the acquaintance of the most celebrated comrades: Henri Lucas, who had just served two years in prison in Angers, Escartefigue Vérité who came from Paris and whose real name nobody knew, Jésus, so called on account of his goatee, Manuel, the printer from the rue Fortia-Géraud, at whose place the paper was produced, then there were Adrien, Pertuis, Francis Guy, Antoine Antignac, Emile Rinaldoin, Eugène Sartoris, Ferdinand Calazel, Emile and Victor Rampal, and Leca. He became one of *L'Agitateur's* greatest stalwarts. Into it he injected a certain view of the world that thereafter conditioned his behaviour.

Throughout Europe, tens of thousands of autonomous groups just like theirs, in a burgeoning of sometimes contradictory ideas, gave unstintingly of their energy for freedom's sake. Everything was ranged against them: the sabre, the murderous brutaliser, the holy water sprinkler, the robber of souls and promiser of paradise in the hereafter in return for the submission of today;



the judge, lurking crab-like in his grotto of files, and the cop. The latter was seen most often. Two years before, the police had arrested the then editor of *L'Agitateur*, Trémolière, along with ten companions on the pretext of 'theft of dynamite and constituting a criminal conspiracy', after having themselves planted the dynamite under their desks. They had repeated the operation with Trémolière's successor, Louis Riguier, on a charge of his having made a false statement of residence. His replacement, Edouard Roch, was arrested for breach of the legislation on registration of periodicals. Their narks, their *snouts* were at work everywhere. On occasions even, these were former comrades who had been induced to spill the beans: like Auguste Marcellin, the latest to have come to light, and who had blandly handed to the anti-anarchist brigade the minutes of the conferences held in Lyons and Turin. And so many others! On the pretext of making a search, the police would terrorise families and smash everything in their homes. On the excuse of press laws or without any pretext at all, they seized newspapers, pamphlets, manifestos, posters and correspondence. Mount a trial? Even when they tried that, 2 years or 5 years would elapse before the verdict: plenty of time to go bankrupt. Time for authorities to turn up something else. The well to do had rifles, law, the banks and plenary indulgences for Paradise. That left faith, mental agility and daring. For every anarchist who fell, ten sprang up to take his place and always they were more hot-headed and staunch in their beliefs than before.

Every day between noon and 2.00 pm., instead of lunch, Alexandre, along with Roques would devour the multicoloured propaganda pamphlets, ranging in price from 0.05 to 0.50 francs, left to him by the orphan... pamphlets by Bakunin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Malatesta, James Guillaume, Louise Michel, Sébastien Faure, Stirner and Elisée Reclus, which they would then regurgitate together as handouts or at meetings.

Gradually, through his reading and the discussions in Pouget's *Le Père Peinard*, Faure's *Le Libertaire*, Zo d'Axa's *L'En-Dehors* or the Natanson brothers' *Revue Blanche*, he came to form a picture of France, a country with which he was less than familiar.

If the government of *Méline-pain-cher* (Meline dear-bread) was to be believed, everything was going just fine, as ever. The workers were happy: since more savings bank accounts were being opened in France and more were betting on the tote. But nobody spoke about the 90,000 people who died of hunger every year. Nor did anyone go into the degree of frustration one must have felt to stake two franc's worth of miserable dreams of splendour on some nag.

Our trade was thriving. Perhaps science had failed to deliver the golden Age which yesterday's scientists, like Compté, Taine and Renan had foretold (the stuff of the dreams of poets and philosophers), but at least OUR engineers and OUR scholars were working for the nation's prosperity: 1200 automobiles were on the road, the great race from Paris to Marseilles and back, which had just been fought out between Renault, Panhard-Levassor, Bouton, Peugeot and Bollée, had set a fantastic record by covering such an enormous distance at an average of 30 kilometres per hour, which is to say, at half the speed of a galloping horse! It is true that whereas the necessary funds were found to build racing cars for the use of the sporty rich, there was never a *sou* available to boost the wages or build accommodation for the use of those whose hands created the country's wealth.

The bicycle was beginning to live up to its nickname of 'little queen': now, according to the advertising headings, it took only two months of the average wage to pay for one. A tram-line had just been inaugurated in Marseilles. In Paris, some bold spirits were drawing up plans for an underground railway: the metropolitan line. Across the land, new railways were under construction: restaurant cars and sleeping cars were being put into service. At sea we held the blue

ribbon thanks to the *Touraine*, belonging to the *Compagnie Transatlantique*, the most luxurious steamship ever built. True, for the sailors, it was still the Middle Ages, with a discipline worthy of feudalism, with no cooperatives, no hostels, no protection of any sort against the employer and his divine right representative, the captain, the rule of the *traffickers in human flesh*, the slavers with whom Alexandre had had dealings after his desertion: but that was something that was not forced upon the attentions of the readership of *L'Illustration* and *Le Figaro*.

In short, scientific discoveries were undeniably spreading in, so to speak, a natural fashion, and doubtless would bring benefits gradually to an endlessly increasing mass of people. But human happiness was not one of the factors considered in the making of investments. What the financiers had in mind was profits, not the harmony of society. Sometimes their choices turned out to be beneficial, but unwittingly and fortuitously so. If the bicycle developed for instance, it was primarily because certain people were making more money out of selling more of them, and not primarily because it made the workers happier: and otherwise why wouldn't the bankers have provided the workers with decent housing in the first place? Alexandre had just seen Kropotkin issue a word of caution to the privileged through *L'Agitateur*: 'There is a force', he had written, 'which has turned production upside down for the past half-century. Placed in the service of falsehood, it has produced inequality. Placed in truth's service, it will be called happiness. It is science. It is just too bad for some if today it goes by the name of DYNAMITE!'

The telephone was spreading. For the past year there had been talk of Marconi's radiotelegraph, capable of transmitting a message from across the Channel without wires. There was talk of mysterious rays discovered the previous year by the German Roentgen and capable of piercing the heaviest bodies: X Rays. There was talk too, of another radiation emanating from a curious metal called uranium and which had allegedly left an impression on photographic plates. There was even more talk about the death of Pasteur the previous year, and of how he had 'invented' microbes, making it possible, following anthrax and rabies, soon to prepare vaccines against diphtheria, typhoid, plague and maybe pulmonary tuberculosis. Marvellous discoveries by a genuine altruist on his way to becoming a fabulous businessman, and taking their place on the pharmacy shelves alongside Pink pills, Géraudel pastilles or Cola Mariani wine. Thanks to all this, the mother in the poorest districts, unable to feed her fifth child, still—(and would continue to do so)—resorted for many a day to the knitting needle—condemned by law and by morality and threatened with notoriety and imprisonment for her refusal to give birth to a soldier to be.

It was said that in the finer districts people were even becoming bored, doubtless because they had the time for it. The 'toffs' there proclaimed that they were 'shattered', 'fagged out' or 'dead beat' while playing 'lawn tennis' with beautiful young things. As for the inhabitants of the Belle de Mai and Vieux Port districts, they slogged away 12 to 14 hours a day, without holidays, without sickness or accident insurance, without the prospect of retirement—and quite happy to judge by the quaint Sunday game of *pétanque*. But, the bosses mused, aren't those people the happiest of all with their simple pleasures?

In short, any murmur of complaint was always countered by someone ... claim that they were fortunate to be living under a *République*, that the deputies, elected by universal suffrage, were the authentic representatives of each and every citizen, that the government was accountable to them for its actions—and that, consequently, if everything was not perfect, they were slowly but surely on the road to greater equity. The deputies were seeing to that.

On this topic Alexandre had one or two furious arguments with his father: these ended with doors being slammed. In fact, between pernods, Joseph saw eye to eye with most French people in

criticising the regime. But whereas his sneers had turned to fury during a scandal as enormous as the Panama scandal four years before, his recriminations had never been carried any further than the cafe doorstep. Once he had agreed with his cronies for two hours that 'the more the cabinet shuffles, the more it is the same old story' and that 'the little man was always done down', he would shuffle off home having had his fill of politics, convinced that he had done his civic duty, amazed when all was said and done, by the liberality of this easy-going *République* which let you vent your spleen without coming on you like a ton of bricks.

Joseph was a moaner, but a resigned one, with political theories of negligible interest, subtly influenced by newspapers with huge circulation but small professional conscience, incapable of seeing clearly for himself, the fodder of demagogues of every hue, overwhelmed by the problems of survival but not of living, sensitive to the fine promises, chauvinistic, confident of having blazed a trail for democracy worldwide, and that despite the slaughter of the Communards; in him Alexandre discerned the perfect prototype of Monsieur Prudhomme, the average Frenchman. He was Darien's *La Belle France*... soft, vain, jingoistic, self-centred—and led by the nose.

1897. By now Alexandre was eighteen years old. Twenty six years had gone by since the German occupation of 1871 when the Parisian workers had shown a will to resist the invader whereas the bourgeois, having fled to Versailles, seized the occasion to decimate these irritants with the assistance of the occupiers. Following the resignation of General Trochu 'past participle of the verb 'Trop Choir' (To Let Down too Much)', as Victor Hugo quipped, they had slaughtered 35,000 Communards, including all the leaders, all the hopes of socialism—and this had enabled them quietly to seize power under Monsieur Thiers on the back of the Fourth Estate. They had had the people pay off the reparations awarded to the Prussians under the Treaty of Frankfurt, but in the space of a few months had increased their business ten times over. Without affording one extra *sou* to the workers.

Inside the army these collaborationists had even set up a screening committee, to purge it of those officers in whom the spirit of popular resistance was a touch too strong. Now they were making up for their recent cowardice by urging forward some revanchist blusters. Alsace and Lorraine would be snatched back. National greatness. Not one gaiter button...Etcetera. As for those who could see the hypocrisy of all this, they were accused of the ultimate offence: an offence against the flag. They were excommunicated when they could manage it—which is to say they were banished to Nouméa or to Cayenne—for anti-patriotism.

Disappointed, famished, manipulated, emasculated, deprived of their finest, those who had lived through 1871 slipped into resignation. They were afraid: afraid of themselves, afraid of repression, afraid of their own shadows. At least, Alexandre, who belonged to the first generations not to have known war, concluded that they were thus.

The most cynical—or most honest—politicians made no secret of the fact that the 'colonial age' had come at just the right time to supply an excellent bypass down which to direct somewhat reckless youthful energies. Not only would African and Asian conquests open up new markets, thereby creating new sources of profit, but they would also make it possible to throw trouble-makers into the firing line.

On this topic, Alexandre could not resist speaking of what had scandalised him overseas during his five years at sea, in the likes of Panama, Tunisia, Tonkin, the Sudan (where, at the orders of Colonel du Trentinian, the Tuaregs had been 'pacified'); in the Ivory Coast, where the blacks suffered the same fate at the hands of Commandant Cordelier and Captain Marchand: in Dahomey, which had been invaded as far as the Niger: in Upper Ubangi, where Victor Liotard was

carrying out extermination drives from the Congo across to the Nile: in Guinea, in Senegal, in Madagascar especially, where 6000 peasants' and workers' children had just died of dysentery for the greater glory of a once revolutionary flag in the folds of which lurked racketeers. The unfortunate troops, rather than see their own throats cut, had had to slaughter tens of thousands of Hovas: they had forced Queen Ranavalona to submit: with each passing day they carved out new empires for the bourgeois. Oh, the tasks were of course shared! To the workers' lot fell the mud and the massacres; to the titled officers, the useless young sons of great families, the glory: to the bourgeois, the profit. But the workers would wake up to it in the end! One had only to open their eyes!

Alexandre, Roques and all the comrades from the *Egouts de Blanc-Sceau* of Roubaix to the *Copains* from Longues Haies, not forgetting the Parisian activists of *La Révolte* or *Le Libéraire*, beavered away at it day and night in cities large and small.

1897. The Marxists, still referred to as *authoritarian socialists* because, until such time as the classless society arrived, they regarded as inevitable a period of dictatorship of the proletariat, a temporary arrangement but one needed, they argued, to stamp out the last remaining vestiges of capitalism, entered the lists of political activity: hence the contempt in which Alexandre and his friends held them. They got themselves elected to parliament in so-called 'red' wards on the basis of faith in what often were respectable programmes but programmes that they showed themselves incapable of putting into effect. Since the 1893 elections their number has grown to 45 in the Chamber—quite an advance compared with the 12 in the preceding legislature—but a tiny minority in the context of the 445 'aquarium crumb gobblers' as the parliamentary deputies are known.

Aside from a handful of persons wistful for Bonapartism or the monarchy, overwhelmed since the MacMahon venture—these 445 are distinguished one from another by subtle nuances, ranging from the candy pink of the 'government republicans' to the bright red of the 'socialist radicals', via the moderate radicals styling themselves the 'progressive left'. At *L'Agitateur* only one explanation is offered for their conduct: universal suffrage is no obstacle to their doing deals and the Republic is much less of an inconvenience to them than a dictatorship—a regime replete with drawbacks, one to which they would only resort in circumstances of extreme urgency, in order to uphold in the people 'due respect for the law'.

Through splashing around in the aquarium, most of the 'government socialists' have wound up contaminated. The lawyer Alexandre Millerand, managing editor of *La Petite République* delivered a resounding speech just last May at a banquet in Saint-Mandé. He aims progressively to substitute social ownership for 'capitalist ownership', which is to say to nationalise businesses—but slowly, and with due regard for vested interests. He accepts 'the workers' International'—provided, however, that we remain patriots above all else. Since that 'something to suit everybody' speech, he has been looked upon in political circles as a 'realist'—a 'man of the future'. A brilliant career is forecast for him—and he will have one. The workers shout him down. At *L'Agitateur* he is considered a turncoat.

Jules Guesde on the other hand has kept the faith. But he too is desirous above all else of getting control of the government. And that by means of 'parliamentary action, which is the socialist principle par excellence': he has just proclaimed it from the hilltops three months after Millerand's speech, in August 1896.

In no particular did Alexandre see eye to eye with this strategy. Sure, they shared with the Marxists the goal of achieving a society without exploiters or exploited, without executioners

or victims. Sure, in France, a capitalist country like the rest of Europe, there was in progress a sometimes bloody but at all times oppressive class struggle. But take control of the government? No. 'The State is Evil', Bakunin said. Injustice springs inevitably from man's government of man. To set up a dictatorship of the proletariat would be to fall into a worse trap than ever, for the inevitable short term implications of such a setup would be the need for a secret police, press censorship and a dictatorship exercised over minds as well as bodies. The precise opposite of the spread of freedom.

According to Alexandre's cronies, politics is not practised by delegating one's powers for a 5 year term to some individual whom one is not entitled to replace if one is unhappy with him, which boils down to being a citizen for the one thousand four hundred and sixtieth portion of one's life—1461 in leap years—on the glorious day when one stuffs one's ballot paper into the ballot box: politics is practised, ought to be practised every day in any true democracy. The pamphlets bequeathed to Alexandre by the orphan are at one in their condemnation of universal suffrage.

Louise Michel encapsulates them all in a single phrase: 'Your vote is the lowing of an ox scenting the slaughterhouse'.

At the end of six months of militant activity, he was so well schooled in such writings that he quoted from them as casually as drawing breathe. They spoke Bakunin like Monsieur Jourdain spoke prose. The daily practice of action had turned the trainee-helmsman into a professional agitator. He had embraced anarchy in its entirety. It afforded him an ideal, a philosophy, a guiding rule. Had he lived at the start of the Christian era, he might perhaps have been one of the followers of Jesus—the only anarchist who pulled it off, some argued. In 1897, he could see no other cause to which to commit himself than anarchy, being as he was possessed by the absolute, having seen only injustice and atrocity in the world and he scented only compromise in a France that was a disappointment to him.

Following hours spent over his type-case at old man Juge's place, he would occasionally stroll down by the docks. He was sometimes seized then by a hankering for the trade winds, and for night watches in the tropics when he was at the helm and the ship was carving a wake through the phosphorescent waters. But he soon came upon former comrades: they conjured up the past a little: but then they no longer had anything more to say. They were miserable wretches, trundling their defeats through a world of shadows.

With Captain Martinaud maybe... But how would he go about explaining to him that he had discovered a goal in life, a hundred times grander than the command of a ship? How would he explain to him the Stateless, government-less, Lawless, police-less, judge-less world, basking in harmony, towards which he was presently working? He had tried on the day when he had come across him near the Lazaret docks. He had told him with all fire how the criminal was the product of society's injustice—and how most offences are only committed for gain. Abolish the injustice, captain, and you will do away with the vast majority of crimes! Society looks upon offenders as rebellious slaves in need of punishment; we regard them as sick brothers whom we will make every effort to cure with every means that science may indicate to us. The history of the West today boils down to the history of the conquest of power by a succession of castes. But that is not necessarily the definitive history of the whole of mankind.

'You cannot alter the fact that there are wolves and sheep, gluttons and misers,' Martinaud had murmured, startled by so much vehemence.

Alexandre had replied with a diatribe upon the necessity of allowing the creative capacity of the individual to develop.

Martinaud said nothing for a long time but just stared doggedly at the sea. He stated in a sad, almost pained voice:

‘Take care, Jacob. Utopias are dangerous. In seeking to have everything at one fell swoop, you risk destroying everything.’

The conversation had died. They had taken their leave of each other. Every time that Alexandre thought back on the meeting, his fists clenched. Martinaud belonged to the lowest of the low: the liberals. People who have an easy conscience because they think they understand things.

Anarchist ideas were so self-evident! So self-evident that they need only be propagated everywhere and one would have a general uprising to contend with. The only serious problem remained the propaganda issue. How to alert the exploited to the fact that they had only all to break their chains at the same time in order to be free? That question had been asked for the past twenty-odd years.

During the summer of 1897, Charles Malato arrived in Marseilles in the course of a tour undertaken in an attempt to coordinate the actions of the provincial groups, if that turned out to be feasible. Alexandre was introduced to him on the premises of *L’Agitateur*. He was instantly won over by him. A man of thirty years, with a face that looked as though it had been lit up by the ordeals he had gone through: the adolescent soon came to look upon him as a sort of model. This was the first hero from the anarchist pantheon that he had seen at such close quarters. When Malato expounded upon some idea with that warm, singsong voice of his, everything became crystal clear. They formed a circle around him.

He reviewed the movement’s history. Spoke of the inestimable daring and devotion displayed by the militants of an earlier generation—and of their half-failure as well. Without letting himself be put off by the excess of avenging fury in some individuals, he calmly and indefatigably urged them to draw the lessons of the past. Of their own past.

In the wake of the Commune and the disintegration of the International had come helplessness. Wildcat strikes and huge riots had erupted pretty well everywhere, hopelessly and bereft of political awareness—beggars’ revolts. Ineffectual labour congresses had been held in secret: some sensational trials, like the Lyons trial of 1874, had offered an ephemeral platform. Living as refugees around La Chaux-de-Fonds in the Swiss Jura, some comrades had striven to keep the ideal alive. But no one had managed for very long to propagate it in a France where every militant was registered, shadowed and imprisoned, denied any support from a terror-stricken populace.

By 1880 most of the amnestied Communards had come home from penal servitude, promptly to resume the work of agitation where they had left off. Simultaneously, an idea had been thrown up by the Jura’s international congresses: since the people were asleep, they needed awakening. Since they were afraid, confidence had to be put back into them by proving to them that the Versaillaise could be matched blow for blow. Monsieur Thiers had issued a declaration of war by massacring the Communards: the gauntlet would be picked up. It was at this point that the erstwhile prince Kropotkin, a geographer and explorer of Siberia, more titles than the Romanovs and recently escaped only a few years since from Saint Petersburg’s Peter and Paul prison, had issued, through Geneva’s *Le Révolté*, his explosive watchword: ‘Our action should be permanent revolt, by word of mouth, in writing, by dagger, gun, dynamite and sometimes even by the ballot paper when it is a question of voting for the ineligible Blanqui or Trinquet. We are consistent,

and we, as rebels, have recourse to every weapon when it is time to strike. ANYTHING OTHER THAN LEGALITY IS ACCEPTABLE TO US!

Paul Brousse had reiterated this embrace of political murder in the columns of Geneva's *L'Avant-Garde*. 'When the murder of one can prevent the murder of thousands: resolutely when one is able, by striking down some dull-witted soldier, to ensure the success of a cause by averting anticipated bloody hecatombs.' He had added a repudiation of mindless violence. 'It is obvious that we will display the same circumspection and considerably more prudence in the selection of the act to be carried out in order to make political propaganda.'

Alas, such counsels of moderation had not always been taken to heart. The sorcerers' apprentices of La Chaux-de-Fonds and the Saint-Imier valley had opened the sluiceways. Every individual promptly came up with good reasons for hurling his infernal machine. Humiliations had been rebuffed by means of the random use of nitroglycerine, by heroism, by heroics, by vengeance, by despair. There was no longer any way of holding the troops in check nor of controlling the movement.

There had been a rash of violent acts across Europe: in June 1878 Nobiling made his attempt on the life of Kaiser Wilhelm I; in November Passanante attempted the life of the King of Italy; in '83 the *L'Assommoir* cafe in Lyons was bombed; Cyvoct, wrongly accused of having planted it, was sentenced to penal servitude for life; in '84, at Montceau-les-Mines, the workman Gueslaff, caught red-handed while planting a bomb wounded three gendarmes with his revolver: in January '86, the miners of Decazeville performed a defenestration of the engineer, Watrin; in March, it was Gallo's turn to throw his dynamite into a busy stock-exchange and empty a full magazine at the jobbers: on May Day in Chicago there was rioting that was to give rise to the labour holiday and during which Spies, Engel, Parsons, Fischer and Lingg were seized: it was repeated every 1 May thereafter; in 1890 the town of Vienne had been placed under a state of siege; in '91 troops killed ten demonstrators, two of them children, in Fourmies in the Nord department; in Clichy, mounted gendarmes charge the crowd and beat up Decamps...

'85 saw the return from penal servitude in New Caledonia, where he and his mother had followed his Communard father, of Malato himself.

In all, he had spent 14 years in Nouméa—part of his childhood and nearly all of his adolescent years—until his father had expired at the hands of martinet warders.

Growing up like a savage among savages who, he claimed, were more civilised than the Whites, he had learned the Kanak dialects down there. It was he who had taught them to Louise. In return, when Madame Malato passed away, having succumbed to the climate among the wattle and daub huts of the Ducos peninsula, she had been a second mother to him. She had introduced him to poetry, botany, geology, literature, to music on her piano (where every other key was missing) and to anarchy in the school which she had opened for the deportees' children and shortly also for the natives. Even as certain fathers, mixed up with the worst criminals, dragged their ball and double chain (others such as Henri Rochefort, enjoyed greater freedom) she inspired their offspring with her own wonder at the beauty of things and her own faith in the transformation of mankind.

There was no need for any stockade fortification to pen the convicts on Nouméa: the jungle and the Kanaks saw to the devouring of all would-be escapers. But Louise had one day decreed that these primitives had to be good in that they lived close to nature. Whereupon she dragged Malato with her into the heart of the forest: two trusting souls among the cannibals. Back in the colony, they were given up for dead. But Louise was right.

They had come upon a tribe whose chief they won over in just a few hours by gibbering libertarian theories in his own tongue. The chief, soon followed by the whole tribe, had been converted. 'You and I are of the same breed,' he had said. 'You have been defeated like the unfortunate Kanaks when they tried to stand up to the Whites. Yes, the evil always outnumber the good. They always kill and win the day.' After she had done her best to tend their illnesses and made up her mind to teach them all to read, those political deportees who broke loose from their chain gangs had been welcomed with open arms by the tribe in question. Other runaways... 'mischief-makers' nonetheless ended their days in the cooking-pot, as in the past: perhaps the libertarian spirit had not quite thoroughly pervaded the place.

In '78 when they had revolted, weary of seeing their females carried off and raped and their finest trees felled, tired of finding themselves driven away from the clearings into the deepest bush, the chief had sought her out again. Almost alone (even among the anarchists) in taking their part, she had made the chief a present of her most prized possession: the red flag which she had brandished in the dying days of the Commune. She had recommended him to cut the Whites' telegraph wires as a matter of urgency. But, the rebels, pitting slings and spears against repeating rifles and mountain artillery had soon been overwhelmed. At least Malato and Louise had had the consolation of knowing that their friend the chief had been mown down in a hail of gunfire, with the historic flag draped about him.

Alexandre, we imagine, was stirred by these tales which brought so many memories flooding back to him. When Malato had arrived in France he had promptly hurled himself into activity, aghast at the poverty of the suburbs. He had written a novel *La Grande Grève* (*The Big Strike*) about the Montceau-les-Mines affair: he had founded a paper, along with Jean Pausader, alias Jacques Prolo, and some others; *La Révolution Cosmopolite*; he had taken part in the '89 anarchist conference held at the start of September in the Commerce Hall: it was those that on one occasion, in the face of widespread confusion, he had attempted along with Jean Grave and Pouget (*Père Peinard*) to centralise information concerning the various European groups in the hope of improving the coordination of their actions. But he had had to renounce this plan; in the name of individualism, each militant aimed to act only according to his own whim. Even at this stage was one going to go on dying for nothing?

In '92 and '93 he had seen the 'bloody years' of anarchy from too close quarters not to have misgivings about this. '92 alone had seen 1123 dynamite outrages throughout Europe. To what end? Had the yearned for insurrection broken out?

In Spain there had been the revolt by the peasants of Jerez, with unspeakable tortures inflicted upon the ringleaders. In France, to avenge Decamps, Ravachol had planted his two bombs, one at the home of the president of the Assizes, the other at the home of the public prosecution who had had him sentenced to death. Already in his case, Malato had had the depressing impression of watching splendid energy squandered. He had written... 'He was one of those disconcerting personalities who may bequeath to posterity the reputation of a hero or of a bandit, according to the age in which they live and the circumstances in which they operate.' Guillotined.

To avenge Ravachol, Meunier, the carpenter whom he had seen so hard working and sober 'with his handsome features and the pure features of a cold-blooded zealot, the most remarkable breed of revolutionary illuminism', had blown up the Véry restaurant. Shipped out to Cayenne.

In Spain, to avenge Jerez, Pallas had hurled a bomb at Marshal Martinez Campos. He had been first tortured and then garrotted. To avenge him, two bombs had been planted in the Liceo



theatre in Barcelona: 22 had lost their lives and 50 odd had been injured, a state of siege had been introduced and hundreds of innocent persons mutilated, flayed alive, spiked and burned.

In France, Vaillant, whom he had known in his capacity as secretary of the *Indépendants de Montmartre*, with his 'thoughtful features, melting eyes, dreaming of escape', only to set off to establish a libertarian colony in Argentina's Gran Chaco, and mortally disappointed in the endeavour, had thrown his bomb, packed with nails, during a sitting of the 'aquarium'. He had neither killed nor sought to kill anyone. He had wanted only to utter 'the cry of an entire class which demands its rights and which will soon add action to words'. Guillotined.

To be sure, such heroics were not without a certain flair. Certainly, all these acts had led to a closing of anarchist ranks, putting spirit into the more timid souls. Moreover, one only had to open at random in the archives any issue of *L'Agitateur* of the time. The 1 March 1892 issue for instance: 'She has spoken again this week, *la belle!* The recent attacks have been intelligently directed, the first against the aristocratic millionaire Hotel de la Princesse de Sagan: the second against the apartments inhabited by counsellor Benoit; the third against the Lobau barracks inhabited by the military police. Since, millions of the victims of plunder have felt elated, gripped by mad hopes... If a few gestures are all it takes to strike fear into the leaders what will it be like when such acts spread like a contagion? And the time is not far off! Tragic times draw near! It was war to the death that the bourgeois declared on us in Fourmies: we will reply to it with war to the death, without quarter or clemency, with all of its ghastliness, all its consequences. Let the responsibility fall on those who declared it!...'.

In this war of one against a hundred thousand, the advantage lay with the enemy. The terror-stricken bourgeoisie had hastily voted through the '*lois scélérates*': an extra 800,000 francs for the police budget; confiscation of newspapers, searches, arrests for a suspect newspaper article, for the merest gesture of propaganda; the charges to be heard by a petty sessions tribunal rather than by an assize jury 'for the sake of greater speed', a ban on the advertising of debates; those found guilty removed promptly to Guyane.

Several militants had doggedly carried on. Emile Henry, unfortunately still convinced of the effectiveness of acts of brutal revolt which '...arouse the mass, shake them with a whip lash and show them the vulnerable side of the bourgeoisie, all tremble still as the Rebel steps up to the scaffold', had thrown his bomb at the *Terminus Saint-Lazare* on 12 February 1894. A bloody mistake. That too Malato had lamented: 'The action of Emile Henry who is, moreover, a highly intelligent anarchist of great courage, has stricken anarchy above all else. I endorse any violence which takes aim at the obstacle, which strikes at the enemy, but not that which strikes out blindly.' The dagger-blow delivered by Caserio on the following 24 June against President Sadi Carnot whom anarchists had sentenced to death for his failure to reprieve Henry did not bring him any greater satisfaction. Today he did not feel that he was close to changing his mind.

However the *lois scélérates* had forced him into exile in England along with the likes of good old Louise, Kropotkin and Malatesta. Over there they had met up with Italian, Russian, and German militants and joined with them in founding a paper, *L'Avant-Garde*, thanks to which they had been able to stand back and take stock of 'propaganda by the deed'. The balance was a negative one. Sure, the exploiters had been made to shake in their boots. But they had regained their self-possession, and tightened the screw a turn. As for the working class, maybe in time they would discover that the explosions had roused them from their slumbers. Meanwhile, they had quite simply fought shy of the anarchists. The bombs had made them the pawns of the 'government socialists'.

Consequently, how could one persist with the amusement of hurling sardine cans filled with green powder at inoffensive monuments to the dead? Sinister jokes indeed when the point was to do all in one's power to win back one's audience among the populace. A humble, thankless, subterranean striving, the only currently efficacious endeavour, was vitally necessary today instead.

'To do everything to lure the toiling masses away from the self-styled socialists who today make use of the people in order to carve out a niche for themselves and who, as the masters of tomorrow, would harness the people with an even more burdensome yoke than that of the bourgeoisie (...)

'To play an active part in strikes as in every labour agitation, constantly to refuse to accept any starring role.

*'When, in spite of everything, some comrades may wish to engage in individual acts, it is vital that those acts be such that the masses may readily understand them as the handiwork of people who struggle and sacrifice themselves for the good of all.'*

To tell the truth, but for the personal prestige he enjoyed, many of the militants around *L'Agitateur* would not have embraced ideas so hard to swallow. They would have walked out, slamming the door behind them—or, rather, they would have thrown him out for a police infiltrator. What! Were they to fold their arms precisely when they were most dogged, spied upon and persecuted? Give up the fight? Turn the other cheek? Very possibly on the threshold of success?

So once again Malato launched into his argument, mixing into it the personal anecdotes, likely to sweeten all their minds. Fascinated, Alexandre listened to him until sunrise sometimes, remaining alone with him so as to learn more, pressing him with endless questions and leaving him only to scurry off to Juge's work to resume his employment.

These attacks on the immoderate use of bombs did not prevent Malato from dragging his young disciple and some other comrades along many an evening to the cramped attic which he had rented and converted into a chemistry laboratory. For a refusal to take pointless risks today did not preclude one's preparing for the 'Great Day' when the general uprising would come—an uprising that everyone hoped was imminent—indeed, quite the contrary. The bourgeois had cannons and rifles. The revolutionaries did not. They had to make good the deficit with imagination; to instruct themselves, starting right now, in the manufacture of nitrobenzene, of bitrobenzene and of priming fuses and possibly to build up stocks.

'I will teach you to make bombs,' he would grin at them, 'but on condition that you do not use them. Not right away.'

Naturally, Alexandre's hot-blooded adolescence was intoxicated by acids, powders, retorts and pots. One evening in a supreme act of trust Malato lent him what he called his 'cookery book', a red-backed notebook containing complete recipes for blowing the whole earth asunder. Alexandre took it home with him. Exultantly he read through the preface, intoxicating in its romanticism, and the conclusion, which was apocalyptic: 'One important task will be to level all buildings of symbolic oppression. No remnant of the past is to be spared. Let all monuments which might serve as rallying points for any authority be levelled pitilessly and without remorse... Blow up the churches, the convents, the barracks, the prisons, the prefectures and town halls... Burn all the administrative paper mountains wherever they may be. Put a torch to the title-deeds! Put a torch to the great register of the public debt! Burn the registrar-general's records, recruitment papers, army quartermaster's papers, direct and indirect tax records! Burn these diseased pages, the title-deeds of human enslavement, defended by thousands of soldiers and policemen of every

sort. Notre Dame and the ancient Gothic cathedrals where our forefathers gave of their souls and their very life are masterpieces... But as long as they remain standing, human conscience will not be able to rid itself of the prejudices of which it is the petrified expression... Being unable to place them under glass in the museums, the best course is still to destroy them despite the clamours against revolutionary vandalism, and despite the curses of archaeologists to be.'

What matter the naivety of such lyricism: the recipes held good.

Shortly after his reading them, Alexandre had a discussion with Roques in the Flory bar apropos of the strategic points which, they felt, would need to be blown up come the famous 'Great Day'. Apparently intrigued, a comrade by the name of Leca joined them. The two colleagues were unaware that, under police pressure, Leca in turn had become a police informant. Carried away by his enthusiasm, Alexandre intimated that he was taking it upon himself alone to level all of Marseille's monuments. For good measure, Leca, purporting to believe that he was being tailed, slipped to Alexandre, under the table, a small package containing what crushed carbon, sulphur and saltpetre were needed to make one pound of explosive powder. He would retrieve it in a few days, once the surveillance on him had been relaxed.

At daybreak the next day, a squad of inspectors, armed to the teeth and brandishing a search warrant, forced the door of the little Vieux-Port house where Alexandre was living. Pushing past Marie and Joseph, still bleary-eyed with sleep, they dashed into the room. They rifled everything: they trampled, overturned and thundered; only to discover finally, between Jules Verne, Victor Hugo and Kropotkin, the famous red notebook and the package, which was still tied up with its to the station.

Questioning revealed nothing, except that Monsieur Jacob loudly proclaimed himself an anarchist. So they offered him an alternative: either he 'turned in his gang' or they would jug him for manufacture and possession of explosives. He was frothing with rage. His curses threatened to make things worse for him. The dogged silence which ensued carried him all the way to the Chave prison.

Worried by Alexandre's failure to show up, Roques raced out that morning to ask after him. He returned 'with tears in his eyes' according to what he himself said. Monsieur Juge then scurried in person to the police station. He did everything and said everything he could do and say on his employee's behalf. His pleas were of no avail. 'They needed to make examples and Alexandre was the victim of that.'

Marie called up the services of the whole town. Through a customer, she even managed to reach Vulliez, the public prosecutor. Vulliez, full of goodwill, paid the arrested man a visit in his cell. With an indulgent smile he heard out the young man's story. Then he concluded:

'Had you carried out a robbery, at your age it wouldn't be too serious. But you are an anarchist, my young friend, and that...!'

At the assizes, Alexandre's lawyer, Maître Pianello strove in vain to plead ignorance and claim his client was chastened: but failed to secure a reprieve. As for Leca, he was never sighted again in Marseilles.

### III

*—On 9 June 1890 you were sentenced to six years by the Var assizes in your absence.*

*—How should I know if I wasn't there?*

—You appealed against this sentence and in the meantime were placed in the Aix asylum for observation, the incoherence of your language and your actions having raised suspicions that you were unbalanced. Instead you were only shamming, acting out a charade the more easily to attempt an escape.

—Everyone defends himself how he can.

—In short, you admit the facts?

—Sure. I know what I am doing. I am not attempting to shirk any blame.

*The jurors complained that they could hear only snatches of what was being said and the accused was interrupted and asked to draw nearer. Handcuffed to his gendarme, Jacob had difficulty in getting out of his seat.*

—It's a disgrace to be treated thus in a Republic, in so-called progressive times—he grunted.

*Having made his way laboriously to the bar, he continued:*

—I openly acknowledge responsibility for my actions. I am not the sort to repent. Moreover, one can repent only of properly mischievous acts. I am honestly convinced and believe in all conscience that I acted well. What I did, I did with every justification. The proletariat is no longer liable to enslavement, but to taxation, yes. No longer are the masses content merely to eat: now they want to think. And because they think, castes must be destroyed. I HAVE OPTED FOR THEFT AS A WEAPON. Since reaching the age of reason, I have discovered who my enemies are: the well-to-do, the property-owners, the industrialists, the military and the clergy. Which is to say all of ye who would pass judgement on me.

By the time he emerged from Chave prison in April 1898, he had matured. In the secret world of cells, in the course of protracted conversations with the libertarians who abounded there, he had learnt a lot and a lot had passed through his mind. So much so that had he not been a rebel before his sojourn behind bars, he would have become one then.

After embracing his mother who greeted him with the fire and enthusiasm reserved for the victims of miscarried justice and for martyrs, he went back to Juge's. With eyes more tear-filled than ever, the employer welcomed him with a hangdog manner. Some inspectors had been to question him about his employees. And grilled him like some lawbreaker. They had threatened to make trouble for him: in short, despite all the affection he felt for him, he had had to let Roques go. Taking Alexandre on again was out of the question. Ah, damn it, he was very sorry about it. What his employees did outside their working hours did not concern him. But one had to put oneself in his shoes! Fear made him a pathetic sight. Saying not one word, Alexandre accepted the glowing reference handed him by way of apology. Then set off to seek out his comrades.

In the Flory bar he came across Roques seated at a table with a group of strangers who made much of Alexandre as soon as they heard his name: he had “done time” for the Cause. Now he was in the know!

These newcomers were Parisians, almost the entire editorial staff of *Le Libertaire*. Intrigued by enthusiastic letters from Malato who, while complaining of the fact that he had been faced with some problems following Alexandre's ‘incident’, had meantime opted to leave on a trip, they had journeyed down to settle in Marseilles. The *L'Agitateur* group, whose paper had petered

out shortly before, amalgamated with them. Sébastien Faure, presently on a lecture tour, was expected. From the outset solid friendships were struck up. A breath of fresh air after his time inside. Present were Ernest Girault, Henri Dhorr, Prost and 'Imanus'.

And, above all, Louis Matha, the man who had taken over from Sébastien Faure in charge of *Le Libertaire* when he was away, a low-set, stocky fellow with an angular beard, a one-time hairdresser dressed with painstaking affectation. A Gascon, from Casteljalous.

The initial contact did not go beyond politeness: Matha seemed a cold fish, distant and deliberately close-mouthed. One had to penetrate a whole breastwork of modesty and shyness in order to reach him. Only then was the effort rewarded.

Alexandre was already aware of Matha as manager, along with Zo d'Axa, of *L'En-Dehors*. Of his having been sentenced to a 2 year term of imprisonment in 1893, for an article which had had the misfortune to displease the government. Of his having fled to London. And of his hasty return in early February 1894 when he had learned of Emile Henry's having thrown his bomb. The way in which he had followed Henry everywhere, beseeching him in the name of the Cause, to forego that act. But, with nerves shattered and all hope gone, Henry had dismissed him out of hand.

He was very shortly to learn of the sequel to that obscure episode from the lips of the manager of *Le Libertaire* himself. Immediately Matha had learned of the sinister news and the horror of the 20 wounded, he had forgotten his disagreement with the act and attempted to do his friend one last good turn. With Millet and Ortiz (the *fin de siècle* dandy-housebreaker with the impeccable parting in his wavy hair), in tow, he had raced to the unfortunate hero's home in the rue des Envierges, in order to spirit away any trace of explosives before the police would arrive. Since Henry had proudly admitted what he had done, having planned it deliberately he said, as a way of striking a blow at 'that pretentious and thoughtless mass of 300 or 500 franc a month white-collar workers, more reactionary than their bourgeois masters', Matha's expedition had proved futile. On the other hand, the *Sûreté* had got wind of him through informers unknown.

They had promptly tried to implicate him in the bombing of the Foyot restaurant in which Laurent Tailhade had lost an ear. They had arrested him repeatedly. In the end, for lack of evidence, they had had to make do with having him appear at the 'trial of the Thirty'. The double-dealing Bulot, the implacable prosecutor of Decamp and Ravachol, had targeted him. And then had had to set him free along with the rest.

Matha was the very opposite of Malato: a perfectly lubricated precision-instrument which was on the go day and night, imperturbable, without any apparent strain, even if one always had the impression that he looked lazy. In reality, Alexandre was drawn by him into a real maelstrom.

The elections were imminent. Every effort had to be made to capitalise upon the excitement which these inspired in people, so as to hold the 'charade' up to ridicule. Just one watchword: sabotage.

Almost as soon as he had been found a place in a printshop by Roques, one in which Roques too had found work, Alexandre committed himself wholeheartedly. From La Belle du Mai to Menpenti and from La Madrague to La Croix-Rouge, he roved the city and its suburbs, popping up right in the middle of election rallies, whether by radicals, socialists or Catholics, haranguing, heckling, working himself up into fever pitch, sneering. On occasion he came to blows with the *apaches* whose services as stewards the good gentlemen had taken care to hire. Elsewhere he had merely to chat with the workers and peasants. Wherever he was the first to arrive.

His greatest success was in La Ciotat on the very polling day when Antide Boyer took on the socialist Eugène Rostand against whom Alexandre had borne something of a grudge ever since Rostand's supporters had given him a kicking in his earliest days as an anarchist. Followed by three comrades, he burst like a whirlwind into the polling-hall only minutes before the polls were due to close, slipped an incendiary device<sup>1</sup> into the box and beat a retreat before the gendarmes on duty there had had time to react. There was tremendous rejoicing in the Flory bar when it was learned that the poll had had to be declared annulled.

After a few undertakings in this vein, he earned considerable prestige among the comrades. He had gained in self-assurance. Although he was the youngest, they heeded him, obeyed him and sought his advice. No meeting was ever started until he had arrived. He had become a leader.

But he spent the bulk of his days at work and was always somewhat serious in his approach. It never occurred to him to do otherwise. It never had. It was the police who made the decision for him.

Scarcely one month after his release from jail, four policemen had turned up at the Jacob household, brandishing a search warrant. One word of objection from him, and they were ready to haul him away again and he knew it. So he looked on without opening his mouth as they ransacked his mother's wardrobes. By the time they left, it looked as if a horde of Huns had passed through. Joseph, as he did after one of his binges, spent a long time slouched on a chair in the kitchen, meditating upon the mayhem all about him. A frantic Marie was scuttling between one ransacked room and another.

'Something must be done!' She moaned between stifled sobbing. 'This cannot be! They have no right! This is a Republic!'

Only Alexandre seemed to have retained his sang-froid. A fortnight later the ransacking was repeated. And a fortnight after that. And so on, on a regular basis, every fortnight.

The neighbours, at first moved to pity by the plight of Madame Jacob, then began to shun the shop on the basis that there is no smoke without a fire. Some, like Rolande and her father, the post-office clerk, being especially jealous of their good name even avoided saying hello to her. Others made snide innuendoes or asked after him with hypocritically wounding remarks. Marie let fly at this pack of dogs. She was carried away with anger, deliberately sometimes. Nerves on edge, she could not bear comments being passed on her son. She hurled a box of chickpeas into the face of her dearest friend. Head held high she strode along the street, braving the tittle-tattle, and following with her most radiant smile and in a provocative manner any who altered course so as to bypass her, forcing them to shake hands with her.

Not for a moment did she ever query whether the surveillance to which Alexandre was being subjected was justified or not. He had explained the import of his activities to her. Had given her his version of the facts. That was sufficient for her. He was no liar. He was well-meaning. It was up to her to play her part in the ordeals he was undergoing. At the start, she had failed to understand his fits of rage and the violence of some of his aims. Now, in view of the widespread baseness which she saw about her, she herself had the same feelings. Her revolt did not spring from any

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<sup>1</sup> Here, for anyone who might be interested, is the recipe given in No 2 of *Le Balai Social*: 'Take a piece of stick phosphorous as big as the head of a large tiepin (the aforementioned stick of phosphorous can be obtained from almost any dealer in chemical products or varnishes) and wrap it in a ballot paper, ensuring, however that air can get to it, for the stick phosphorous only ignites in open air at 20 degrees:—enfolded thus in a scrap of paper, it should easily ignite in a moment or two and burn all of the ballot papers inside the box in which this new style of ballot paper will have been deposited.'

deep convictions, but from the unbearable revelation that the very ones for whom Alexandre and his friends were working so hard were the first to persecute them. The upshot was the same... to wit, rebellion.

Joseph, watching his wife turn into a revolutionary, did not dare say anything: which was doubtless the wisest policy.

During the police's fifth visit, Alexandre at last spoke up:

'And you reckon this will make me renounce my beliefs?' he asked as calmly as possible.

He was advised to refer to the station. Which he did. The implications of what was said were very clear. The inspector was only doing this to protect Jacob from himself. To induce him to stay on the straight and narrow. In short, for Jacob's own good. Anarchists who proclaimed themselves the enemies of society ought not to have been surprised to find society defending itself against them how it could.

Alexandre pointed out that his parents were blameless in an episode in which they were among the chief victims. At which the inspector seemed to reflect.

'There might be a way,' he said, 'Make honourable amends. Write to the prefect. Then we shall see what we will be able to do in response to whatever tokens of good will you may have offered.'

'Such as?'

'Interpret that how you like,' the man answered coldly. 'Come on. A little common sense! An intelligent lad like yourself won't want his life ruined with such folk at your age! Work for us! Nobody need ever know a thing...'

Alexandre flew into a rage. The other one stopped him abruptly.

'I could have you taken away for insulting behaviour if you prefer.'

The exchange was at an end.

The following week, having set off for work at 8.00 am., as usual, Alexandre spotted his employer awaiting him on the threshold.

'Inspector Fabre sought me out a short time ago,' the printer began.

With a measure of sadistic curiosity to see how the man's courage would hold up, Alexandre allowed him to ramble on. His speech concluded with the offer of a 50-franc note and some accompanying sweet-talk.

And so, aged 19, he again found himself without work and with little likelihood of finding any, most likely spied upon by people who had succumbed to blackmail by Fabre, hounded by the police, his parents systematically ruined and pointed to in the district, annoyed, an ex-con. who would surely be starving before too long (where was he to get the money to live on?)... all because he had imagined that he might with impunity ventilate his criticism of society's injustice. He had neither killed nor stolen nor hurled bombs. He had sent some polling boxes up in flames, but nobody knew that. The only crime with which he might be charged was the crime of wanting to free men of the very tyranny which he was being subjected to.

Cheeks flushed, he tramped the streets of Marseilles, pounding the pavements in his anger, thirsting for revenge, desperate. Laden with debts, Marie had but one course left to follow: to seek out what she referred to as 'the monkey', the pawnbroker who had, for a derisory sum, bought from her the titles to everything that she had mortgaged already to the Cr dit Municipal, which is to say all that she possessed.<sup>2</sup> Unless she could pay off the interest due (about 60% of the

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<sup>2</sup> Protected by article 411 of the Penal Code, which prescribed imprisonment and fines for any unauthorised persons who established or managed porn-shops, the porn agent did superb business in those days. The poor wretch,

total sum) within one year, she and Joseph would find themselves back on the pavement with nothing. Like tramps.

The oddest notions came to him as he tramped the streets. One above all: the simplest and most seductive one... that he get hold of a couple of revolvers (simplicity itself since these were on open sale) and on that final day when he had tried everything but to no avail, whenever they had come to empty the house, carry out the furniture and vacate the shop, he would go back to the police station, ask to see Fabre, fill him full of lead and gaze on his startled expression, not without first having blithely explained to him how Fabre himself had armed the hand which was killing him. Then he would sell his life dear.

‘It is a sorry thing,’ he said out loud, pushing his way through the throng, ‘a sorry thing to be nineteen when life might be so beautiful.’

With a few words he put Marie in the picture. She burst out crying.

‘Would you rather see me go to Fabre and accept his proposition?’ he asked.

She thought for a moment, unsure what to reply, unsure which words to use. Then she unburdened herself.

If she strode like a wild beast through the streets, it was because she was proud of him. Dignity was all they had left. There was no need to besmirch it. She had a higher regard for him on account of what he had done than for that other lad Brun who had gone to the Polytechnique and become a general. How they would come out of it all she did not know. But they would come through with heads held high. If begging were necessary, she would have begged and so would his father, who was not in the know. Events had opened her eyes. She had been loath to believe the world contained so much wickedness. And she had been wrong. Now she had never achieved much... but he just had to succeed. And she did not mean social success, as he well knew. If tomorrow he would make the revolution with his comrades, she would have gone to the barricades beside him and would have passed rifles to them. And if he would not go, she would have gone alone.

She collapsed, sobbing into his arms, overcome by a nervous breakdown. Alexandre had to calm her. She wanted to take a drum of petrol and set the district ablaze. She wanted to seek out her son’s comrades to organise an uprising, seize the town hall, the prefect’s office, the tax offices, the pawn shops, the gendarmerie post and raze it all to the ground. He wore himself out explaining to her that things were not that simple.

However, he did not abandon his idea. Roques obtained the revolvers for him. He felt for them beneath his clothing every time he crossed paths with municipal police. Then he arrogantly used to cut across them, hoping to be challenged so as to get the chance to open fire. He was obsessed with visions of catastrophe. Ready for anything.

Matha did his best to calm him:

‘Be careful in what you do,’ he told him. ‘You’re more use to us alive than dead. What your intentions are I don’t know and I don’t wish to know. But spare a thought for the consequences. Remember Emile Henry.’

The comment was a sensible one. He would have liked to be able to heed it. But was not in a position to. He was seething with rage. And fine talks would not cure that.

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unable to get through the month on loans from the Credit Municipal sought him out. Whereupon the agent would advance him an additional sum, on condition of an undertaking that the client would surrender all title to his belongings to the agent, should he fail to pay back the advance in time: which, nine times out of ten, was the case. At which point it only remained to sell off the belongings for a considerable profit. This occupation was banned shortly before the 1914 war.



It was at this point that the girl in the veil reappeared one evening in the backroom of the 'Brasserie du Midi' at the end of the meeting, just as they were dispersing. Pale, face-drawn as if exhausted, whenever she made straight for them exclamations escaped from their throats.

Her name was Rose. They all knew her. After his having searched high and low for her in Marseilles! She had also been Clarenson's girl—Clarenson, the comrade who was now serving 3 years for theft in Chave prison, where Alexandre had run across him.

She recognised him immediately.

'You're the one who took a knock on the head from a stool meant for me, in the 'Brasserie de Noailles'!' she burst out.

He blushed and stammered something banal. She walked over to sit close by him. How long had he been active? How come they had never run across one another before? The others drifted off one by one without their noticing, until they found themselves alone.

Alexandre spilled out his fury. He talked about his death wish and the sense of powerlessness by which he was beset, and his aversion from the whole conspiracy of self-satisfied, smug, bloated, selfish, prattling, shrewd, subtle and hypocritical mediocrities: on and on he ranted.

'Do nothing,' she murmured. 'You do not have the right to throw yourself into the wolf's jaws.'

Then they talked of Clarenson, whose nickname was 'the baron' on account of the fastidiousness of his dress and his speech, due to undue familiarity with the casinos. Alexandre had shared a cell with him for two weeks. He remembered from then a queer fish, courageous but consumed by vice, rebellious but only out of an urge to rise in society, sometime incoherent but Machiavelian in his guile: anarchic, to be sure, but hardly a revolutionary. And this was the very Rose whom Clarenson had accused of ruining his life.

He walked her home to a squalid furnished room in an old building near the docks and obtained her permission to see her again the next day. She intrigued him. She was the very first woman that... But not for anything in the world would he have admitted as much to her. His libertarian theories, exacerbated by his Latin temperament made him clumsy in the seducer's role.

He conducted his siege like a general of note. A softly-softly bombardment of appointments and seemingly casual encounters. Entrenched in cafes, a whole network of trenches and counter-trenches, a whirl of chats, passions, hopes and complicity. The final assault was launched. He wormed his way into her room (a hovel more than a room) and took her in his arms.

His ardour disturbed her, but he was afraid of her too. She had been through too much not to be afraid of further suffering.

Resolutely, she broke free of his embrace, doing violence to herself rather than to him. He wanted too much and all at once... body, heart and spirit. He did not even know who she was. What if he were to despise her once he found out?...

Once he found out what?

Then, in a slightly rasping voice, half-reclining beside him on the bed, the only place to sit in the room, she told him her story, as commonplace as any 50 centimes penny dreadful.

Her mother had abandoned her and her sister Jeanne. The sisters had reared them with blows at the Girls' Reformatory. At the age of 15, she had been sent out to work as a chambermaid. Being pretty, she was harassed in the aisles by the sweaty-handed employers. And very often by the sons of pimply-faced and empty-headed bigwigs. That was not to her liking. She aimed to keep herself pure for Love. They dismissed her. The sisters punished her. And so it went until she came of age.

Two years after that, she remembered, she had been working near Carcassonne, in the rue Condorcet and had fallen for a fellow who had promised her the sun and the stars. An anarchist. A gambler, more than anything else. Clarenson. With him, she had been happy for a time. While he was a winning streak, they lived high. The next day the cupboards were bare. *It* had had the better of him. He would have sold his mother to get a stake to risk at the tables. He had begun to do a spot of housebreaking, along with Bonnefoy who followed him everywhere. They had pulled some big jobs. Twice they had had to open fire on police. In the end, Clarenson had been captured. In 1891, before she had met him, they had wanted to give him 3 years in Bordeaux. He had been removed from the prison to an asylum. He was not really mad, but nor was he normal, she recalled now. Highly irascible. Given to losing his self-control. Used to roll on the ground, with terrifying headaches when he was sick. Especially in the left temple. Sometimes she had only to touch him—barely to brush against him for him to start screaming. Then he calmed down. He was hysterical, the doctors said. His father had been epileptic.

In '94, 5 years before, he had been sentenced to another 3 years, in Aix this time. No longer could he be held in prison. The doctors had committed him to the Saint-Pierre asylum in Marseilles. During this time she had found herself penniless. To begin with, her sister had helped her out a little. Then she had gone looking for work. With no educational qualifications she had had to take what she could get. Two jobs, three jobs, then nothing. The street. The pavement. She had lived like that for 6 months. Had not even earned that much. She had been ashamed. Frightened. Ran away when men approached. The 'working girls' treated her as an amateur. They despised her. When Clarenson got out the following year they had stayed together. But he had become a tyrant. With weasel words he had urged her back on to the streets. She felt contempt for him because of his failure to beat the gambling bug. So, when he had been arrested four months later she had walked out on him. And been taken on again as a chambermaid. But, upon discovering her past, her employer had shown her the door without even paying her what she was owed. This had happened a fortnight ago. The other day, when she had dropped into the 'Brasserie du Midi', it had been her intention to borrow some money of someone... Bonnefoy, say. But Bonnefoy was not there... And then the two of them had got to chatting. Now, how was she to make ends meet unless she was to go back to that life?

Alexandre had desired her from that first day in the 'Brasserie de Noailles'. Just then, she was the dearest thing in all the world to him. He had imagined her a queen in exile: she was a whore. Nobler than any duchess, than all their respectable virgins and beauties. Pure, despite her social degradation. Persecuted like him, and a rebel like him. Doubtless, an honest girl, she was equally pleased with him. But the intensity was not the same. She had had to pass through an ordeal which he had been spared.

The injustice aroused an urge to protect her. He swore to her that she would not have to sell her body again. He would see to everything. He would find money. Would make her happy.

She smiled indulgently at the naivety of this 20 year old who believed he could change the world with an oath. He was open: she had the scruples and inhibitions of a bourgeois. She was tainted by caste prejudices: he had an open mind. She was ashamed of what she had done. He would have taught her to walk tall.

The workman prostitutes his own arms to the employer. The seamstress prostitutes her eyes to the needle, for a miserable wage. All prostitution is much of a muchness. Only bourgeois morality, which deemed the sexual act sinful, drew any distinctions. Christ himself had loved and respected Mary Magdalen. Priests generally preferred to forget that chapter in the life of

their chosen paradigm. It upset bishops and gave them indigestion beneath their silken robes, their gold and their jewels, to think of the possibility of their God's having loved a fallen woman! But that was in fact the only edifying episode of their parasite religion.

Ah, proper morality! Love one another only within the sacred bonds of matrimony! A sacrament of the traders in the Temple! Virginity as an asset to be traded for social status: a vulgar contract of sale! That was the real prostitution, ugly, hypocritical insidious and sordid! Respectable girls bartered their body against a name, a coach, some clothes, a castle: they called that love, those high society types! True love, into which they retreated in order to *deceive* their own husbands, (that ignoble word) in order to commit adultery (an ever more squalid one!). Alexandre was fighting to demolish all this and to restore things to their former beauty. If Rose failed to believe and doubted him, if she failed to trust him in everything, on everything, then it meant that he had been mistaken about her. She was nothing but one of the vanquished. He was ready to pick up his hat and be off.

She clung to him. And let herself go. She became his lover and from that moment on he became her man. Whereas his fate had not yet altered anything, she had allowed him to open up a little glimmer of hope in her life as a girl resigned to her fate.

Alexandre was absolutely sincere in what he was saying: the remainder of his life was to be enough to prove that. Rose had been driven to prostitution only occasionally. Her true trade was misery. Before incurring any blame, she had been a victim. It was this which entitled her to Alexandre's consideration. He found her beautiful; she pleased him; he believed in the worthiness of free love: what could be more natural than that he should take her as his companion?

We should add that undoubtedly no other woman would have been so devoted, nor so well qualified to assist him in the perilous battle which he had joined. He loved her: of that there was no doubt. But above all he loved, through her, a certain view of the world. For her, the opposite was the case: she was to be enamoured primarily of the man and then, through him, of anarchy. Judges, unless they are also poets, are not wont to interest themselves in such details, however: they simply wrinkle up their noses at the mention of such illicit love between a thief and a disagreeable woman ten years his senior.

A few days later, Alexandre informed his mother that he would no longer be sleeping at home. The alleged reason was that, in this way, inspector Fabri might call off the searches. But he still smelled of Rose's perfume. As Marie pointed out to him. Whereupon he told all.

Some lingering residue of Catholicism in her made her a little scandalised by this biblical union. But he pointed out to her that there could be no half measures in the embracing of libertarian ideas. If she agreed with him about the rest, she had to accept this as well. In short, she asked if she might see the object of this quite unexpected passion. Rose displayed her best features, all softness and attention. To Joseph, she was introduced as Alexandre's 'fiancee'. Not that he was taken in. But the old sot was so excited at the fetching figure of his daughter-in-law in anarchism that he forgot his scruples.

Some days afterwards, a comrade found new employment for Alexandre as a pharmacist's assistant. If he applied himself, in three years he might obtain a diploma and become a pharmacist, second class. Seeing this as a way to repay his mother's debts, he set about his researches into new remedies for human suffering. Clutching at straws he immersed himself in pharmacy.

This was a period of intense happiness. His plans for revenge were forgotten. Of his friends, he saw little: he had not the time. Matha had headed back to Paris with his group. Malato, who had come on a week's visit, did not overstay that period: along with Sebastian Faure, Pouget,

Octave Mirbeau and so many others, he had committed himself completely to the Dreyfus affair. Publication of *Le Libéraire* and *Le Père Peinard* had been suspended from the start of that year, to release them to spend all their time on a new daily paper, *Le Journal du Peuple* which was rabidly pro-Dreyfus. Malato was as busy as could be. The bourgeoisie was displaying an anti-Semitism so despicable that the defence of the wretched captain Dreyfus struck him as a yearned-for opportunity at last to seize upon a real campaign issue. He was preparing this campaign with (for once) some republicans... Alexandre heard all this distractedly.

Only Roques worried him a little. Likewise a victim of inspector Fabre who had had him driven out of his new printworks, Roques had embarked upon *individual expropriation*. Since they were making life within the law impossible for him, he had decided to step outside the law. He was urging Alexandre to do likewise. Alexandre approved wholeheartedly of what Roques was about: snatching back from the rich what they had stolen from the poor... it was almost their duty. In any case, as a line of behaviour, it was perfectly justified and worthwhile. But just at that time, not without the occasional regret, he preferred to go on Sunday picnics in the country with Rose, pick examples of the flora and press them in his botanical album, after having made love under the sun.

In the evening he would return to his furnished room. She was waiting for him. And had prepared something to eat. The comrades used to come to dinner. They whiled away the time on plans for the future. They put the world to rights. Laid plans for the struggles to come which would make mankind happy.

But this idyllic interlude was short-lived. One morning in 1899, a man entered the pharmacy. He asked to speak to the boss and engaged him in conversation for a few minutes in the back of the shop. Alexandre realised what that meant. He took off the white overalls and set them down on a bench.

‘You know, if my customers were to learn...’ the pharmacist told him. ‘You are handling some dangerous substances here.’

Two hours after that, Marie joined Rose in her tears. Fabre had come back with his men. They had wrecked everything, as was their wont. In addition, this time an inspector had confiscated her only item of jewellery, an engagement ring, on the grounds that it was too good for the likes of her and that she must have stolen it.

Alexandre listened without batting an eyelid. Then there was the beginning of a strange smile.

‘Very well,’ he said, ‘now to amuse ourselves.’

## IV

— *Your occupation?*

— *I’m in the demolition business.*

— *Where do you live?*

— *Pretty well everywhere.*

— *Have you had to rely upon many informants?*

— *You talk like a magistrate. If you were a housebreaker, you’d know that we need nobody. Upon arrival in a city, if I see chimneys, I say to myself: working folk here, nothing*

*doing. But whenever I see bourgeois residences all closed up, I have no need of further information.*

*—You make an especial target of churches.*

*—Right. If you were to have to set out all the crimes perpetrated by priests in the name of God... the Inquisition, the wars of religion, the murders of the friends of truth... several hearings would not suffice. Religion is dead. Science has killed it off. I will not trample on a corpse.*

*Because they can supposedly obtain delights in the world beyond with their buffoonery, they enjoy riches. I know of what I speak. I have robbed a number of priests. In every instance I found a strongbox, and sometimes more than one. Take it from me, they did not contain smoked herrings. While they contained morsel of bread for the hosts, they also held the enormous sums of money which imbeciles had offered to God and which the soutane-wearers were looking after.*

*Such are the charlatans who dare call me thief. Such are the frauds who invoke the full rivers of the law against me! One has to admit that they have a tremendous cheek!*

*Anyway, since I am magnanimous, I want to offer them my absolution. Amen.*

On 31 March 1899, a police inspector wearing a tricolour sash, followed by two more inspectors and brandishing a search warrant, introduced himself at 2 pm. to Monsieur Gille, agent at the rue Petit-Saint-Jean pawnshop. Gille was suspected of having in his possession a watch which had been stolen following a quadruple murder. He was not yet being charged with complicity and receiving but this might follow.

Distraught and clutching his heart, Monsieur Gille, readily produced his account books. The policeman bolted the front door shut, pulled the curtains across and then turned the card until it read 'Closed'.

Then they had his strongboxes opened. One at a time, they removed the jewels, watches, earrings, candelabras, bonds, policies, plate and cutlery. One of them sorted through the items. The other accurately copied their descriptions and estimated value on a sheet of paper bearing the heading of the Prefecture. The third then placed them in some bags set aside for the purpose. The inventories, punctuated by sarcastic comments, lasted for three full hours under the pained and powerless gaze of Madame Gille and an employee. In all, there were articles there to the value of 400,000 gold francs.

'So, my fine fellow,' sneered one of the inspectors by the name of Pons, once everything had been emptied, 'are you going to dare deny that you are a swindler?'

Monsieur Gille swore that his good faith had been abused, that he was an honest businessman and that if any irregularity had found its way into his accounts, his employee bore the sole responsibility for that.

'Inspector, send for some carriages,' the superintendent cut him short, 'you can explain everything to the public prosecutor and then we shall see if he believes you.'

In the little shop, the dejection affected them all. Gille and his clerk limply allowed the handcuffs to be placed on them without resisting. Two black Marias drew up outside the door and the prisoners, in the secure custody of inspector Pons, jumped into the first one as the neighbours looked on mockingly. The superintendent, the other inspector and the bags containing the controversial items took their places in the one behind.

‘Wait for me here,’ he ordered.

Then he went into the judges chambers, from which he emerged a few seconds later only to tell them as he took back his handcuffs:

‘The prosecutor is busy. He will be interrogating you. I’ll step out for a moment. There’s no point in attempting to escape, understand? You won’t get far.’

For a long time the pair stayed there motionless, sitting on the bench as if they were sitting on burning coals. One hour passed, then two. Evening fell. The superintendent failed to return. The coming and going on the premises was continually diminishing. The time when the offices were due to close passed.

The concierge, on his daily tour of inspection, eventually showed up with his bunch of keys in his hand: ‘What the devil are you doing here?’ he burst out.

Stammering, gesticulating angrily and hopelessly, the pawnbroker tried to explain that he was innocent, that somebody... and he knew well enough who... up there was out to get him, but that he had friends in even higher places. The concierge, worried by this anger which struck him as suspect, and by these somewhat incoherent ranting, set off in search of some magistrates or other. In the end he unearthed an examining magistrate, loaded with work... eager to get home, the magistrate signed an order for the imprisonment of ‘these rogues’. He would clear up the matter the next day at a reasonable hour.

The jailed pawnbroking agent, put behind bars without further explanation, ranted and begged so much and so well that at dawn on 1 April a gendarme sergeant became exasperated and took an interest in his plight. He made a few inquiries and, somewhat baffled, reported the case, which was beyond his competence, to his lieutenant. The latter inquired as to the name of the superintendent who had made the search of his premises. Laurent. He did not know any Laurent. What brigade was he from? A mystery. And his inspectors? One was called Jules Pons. He checked that out. Made inquiries. Then he really lost his way. There was no trace of any Laurent nor of any Jules Pons anywhere. He was forced to face facts: the whole episode had been nothing but one tremendous take-on. There was only one thing which did not have any hint of April foolery about it: those 400,000 stolen francs.

Marseilles and very soon all of France was rocked by irrepressible laughter. Everybody (and there were many) who had ever had any dealings with a pawnbroker felt avenged.

With one amazing stroke which afforded a glimpse of his ‘style’, Alexandre Marius Jacob had opened hostilities against a society which had victimised him. Battle was joined in an unbelievable Punch and Judy show in which Mr. Policeman would be regularly and voluptuously clobbered. A fourpenny opera whose hero stole millions from the rich to return to the poor, reserving for himself but one luxury: laughter. The insolent laughter of the Robin Hood of the Belle Epoque (some had drawn this comparison) who robbed the pawnbroker to get his own back, because the pawnbroker had unscrupulously robbed the unfortunate generally, and Marie in particular, and then to take the charade to the lengths of hauling him right into the Palace of Justice... what a delicate touch, what sheer aesthetic delight!

This was the style which was to be adopted by Arsène Lupin, but that vaguely aristocratic big bourgeois operated, all in all, in the high society circles which his creator, author Maurice Leblanc used to frequent and which Jacob regarded with the greatest of contempt.

Leblanc was loathe to acknowledge the source of his inspiration. Not without reason. We are dealing here with an admirable example of a rehashing, with a dash of literary art, of an embarrassing individual: shorn of all that was frightening about him, equipped with a monocle, dressed

in tail-coat, his derby replaced by a top hat, Jacob was a hit under the alias of Lupin. The easily scared subconscious of the turn-of-the-century readership, most of whom were certainly not drawn from the ranks of labour and who had been unnerved by the anarchists, was reassured by this highly suave, monocled fellow. Moreover, there is little to show some seventy years on that the situation has changed any.

Anyway, the only tinge of regret which Alexandre felt concerning the rue du Petit-Saint-Jean episode was that he had not been able to act out the superintendent's role in person: a 20 year old with such an exalted rank would have been less than convincing. With his grizzled hair, Roque was better suited to the part. As for the third thief, Morel, a comrade from *L'Agitateur* .. he had been the one who, while imprisoned, had heard from the lips of a criminal, the story of the quadruple killing and the stolen watch left with Gille. Morel had passed it on to Jacob. Who had drawn up his plan and had let the others in on it. One final detail: Roques's tricolour sash had been dyed by Marie herself and adorned with the end of Alexandre's first communion armlet sewn in by way of a cockard as a final touch.

Police inquiries yielded absolutely nothing. Twenty- four hours after their escapade, the trio of jokers were on Spanish soil. Morel returned a short time later. Alexandre with Roques in tow, continued on his journey. They had no difficulty in disposing of their share of the loot. Payments to the order of Marie Jacob and of Rose Roux began to pour into a variety of post-restante locations, in sums sufficiently large to enable Marie to pay off her debts and latter to have no further need to walk the streets. A fair amount of what was left found an immediate use.

In Spain the struggle had assumed a terrifying proportion. Even the liberals (whom the two Frenchmen had occasion to meet), freethinkers... bourgeois, sure, but humane with it... showed that they were caught up in it. Money could not cauterise the wounds sustained by the Iberian comrades. But it might ease their material and moral wretchedness and help them prepare for future rounds. Alexandre donated unstintingly: to the tune of about 50,000 francs in all, surely the largest sum to be received by the fighting funds at that time. Roques was less open-handed: in the name of an individualism which his friend dismissed as common selfishness, he was reluctant to empty his pockets just for the benefit of strangers.

Their eyes goggled at the unbearable accounts of the tortures inflicted by the police. In Montjuich, prisoners had had to drink their own urine: others had had to lap the foul paraffin from lamps. Some had undergone the torment of drowning: tied to stretchers, with arms and legs tied behind their backs, they had been tossed into the sea and lifted out only on the point of asphyxiation: others bridled like horses and gagged had been whipped into a gallop; still others had been denied sleep for several days through beatings. It was the Great Inquisition all over again, except for the pretext: these modern persecutions were made, not in the name of religion, but in the name of *raison d'état*. Every wretch suspected of having queried the single article which made up the dogma of modern states... 'come what may, respect the established order' was liable to preliminary interrogation. The grand inquisitors still watched the sufferings of their patients. Some still passed out, out of 'sympathy' with these souls whom they were striving to save at the cost of fleshly mortification. Here, governors, dukes and generals were still living a life of luxury in their splendid palaces, while their goons, themselves the sons of workers and peasants, carried out tortures at their instructions. What, other than the degraded catholicism of capitalism could have reduced a man to a condition baser than a dog? What filthy instincts had been unleashed here? The burning of flesh with a red-hot poker: fingernails pulled out after steel splinters had been slipped beneath them: the crushing of sexual organs: they even used the good old medieval

iron helm which was fitted around the head and, thanks to a vice, compressed the cranium and tore the nose and mouth asunder. Some, like Luis Mas had gone mad under torture. Lots of innocent men had been accused of offences which had never been committed. Most died heroes' deaths, albeit with their bodies destroyed. Of course, all of them were depicted by government propaganda, reiterated by the respectable press, as bandits with no ambitions beyond pillage, arson and murder. Abetted by a conspiracy financed from abroad, their sole aim was apparently to bring Spain to ruination as a prelude to anarchic chaos.

The survivors (among whom Francisco Ferrer was beginning to make a name for himself) tried to re-establish the *Federación de Trabajadores de la Región Española* (Spanish Regional Workers' Federation) in Madrid, Barcelona and in Asturias. In addition to funds, what they lacked desperately was contacts with the French movement. During meetings which he had with them, Alexandre promised to do what he could.

He resolved to do something the moment he was back in France, a nation which seemed to him, in the wake of his journey into the depths of hellishness, a beacon of civilisation, as he wrote in a lengthy letter to Matha.

Elsewhere he had arranged an assignation with Rose in Aix.

He scarcely had time to snatch a few short nights of lovemaking before events crowded in: he soon learned from a chambermaid with whom Rose had worked some time previously, of the dealings of a certain local notary with his clients' money and of the treatment meted out to his servants.

Heeding only his sense of duty, he slipped into the gentleman's house at the earliest opportunity. His good intentions, though, were not matched by his dexterity and the safe resisted his efforts like a leg of lamb resists a toothless person. He had to make do with the 30,000 francs' worth (not a bad sum) of bonds discovered in a drawer, and with a watch that brought him a lot of problems.

The day after the robbery, two inspectors arrested him in a cafe where he was waiting for Rose: it occurred to him that he had mentioned the origins of the watch to a local activist. This 'good comrade' had turned him in. And that was all the more regrettable because he had the item on him, and the bonds as well.

He devised a way of jettisoning this compromising evidence by popping it through a small window at foot level while pretending to lace up his shoes.

Then, just a few minutes before interrogation, he was lucky enough to find himself in a holding all along with a tramp who was due for release, a good sort overtaken by bad luck.

'Ever found 30,000 francs in your pocket?' he asked him hurriedly.

'Never,' replied the tramp, taken aback at the thought of such a dazzling sum.

'Would you like to?'

The old man would only have to tell Rose that, for his birthday, she had made him a present of a silver watch very different from the rotary's. Then Alexandre tipped him off as to the money's whereabouts. The tramp gave his word.

Only seconds later, Alexandre, under police questioning, was sticking steadfast to his story. In front of the examining magistrate, he kept up the denials. They confronted him with the notary: the watches did not correspond. He was confronted with Rose: their descriptions corresponded: the old tramp had kept his word. Before the criminal court, lawyer Cabassol had no problem in showing that the whole thing was a complete fabrication by the spy, aimed at obtaining the bonus he had been promised for every one he turned in. Such phoney denunciations were very



rife, of course. The moment that Alexandre was released, the mark had dropped out of circulation. He can hardly be blamed for doing so.

The trial had been a talking point in Aix, however. The local comrades had expressed themselves satisfied with the sight of a traitor unmasked at such slight cost: but the police were hopping mad. Alexandre, though, would gladly have preferred less publicity. He decided to move away. Anyway, some parcels of leaflets and pamphlets from the Spaniards had just arrived from Paris.

Rose was given the job of getting instructions to Marie concerning means of communication which Rose, too, was to use. She received the proceeds from his thefts, which had been obtained meanwhile from the fences, and she was to share this with Jacob's mother in accordance with each of their needs. Then he took off with a light heart, with some money in his pocket, and with Roques, who had resumed his activities, along.

'Into the melting-pot with the holy sacraments! Break up the plaster gods for mortar! Into the sawmills with the confession boxes, so that firewood can be made of them! If that means being iconoclasts, then anarchists are just that. As for the corpse of the church, it can be used as a school or as a public granary': he was following Malato's advice literally. He found the overnight stay in the church in Allauch, some twenty kilometres outside Marseilles, especially amusing: the great door had proved to be desperately robust and he had had to clamber on to the roof, climb the length of a lamppost and tie a rope to it, down which to reach the ground. It was then that he gave thanks to the boatswain who had once put him through so much suffering by sending him to climb the mizzen-mast. These acrobatics netted him only 28 pence: hardly worth the bother.

In the Var department he took his revenge on the church in Puget-Ville and then the Sainte Christine chapel near Cuers. The haul there was more satisfying.

This time the road to Spain was a roundabout one. On the night of 2-3 May 1899, Roques and Alexandre paid a visit to Monsieur Couderc in Poillies near Lodève in the Hérault. They had slight reward for their pains: the small sum of money, some elegant clothing, the latest fashion elasticated boots, some bed linen, towels, blankets: enough to fill one's bathroom drawer. Anyway, Rose was staggered by the parcels she received.

Arriving in Béziers, the pair had only a few centimes to their names. They spent two pence on bread, seven on cheese, eight on a jemmy and twelve on a file. And took a room with Madame Barthes. That left them penniless. But comrades whom they met at the Fourastié café gave them the key to wealth: news that the counts of Cassagne were away from their castle home.

The wrought iron gate to the grounds was easily opened: the kitchen door yielded to the gimlet: the rooms gave up their riches, 8855 francs in bonds, jewels and silver. Only the strongbox gave any trouble. Alexandre lost his temper. He could not go on in this line of business without familiarising himself with the rudiments of it at least. By way of an apology, he left a note on a sideboard.

'You are lucky, filthy aristocrat, that we had not enough time: otherwise your strongbox would be much lightened by now. Until the next time. Let us hope it may go better.' Surely with the police raids on Marie's home in mind he signed it: 'Attila'.

Since Roques was feeling nostalgic for Marseilles again, Alexandre went on alone. Three days later, on 19 May, in Narbonne he fell in with an Italian comrade by the name of Fossati, who had told him that he was acquainted with a special technique.

And it was the truth. As Monsieur Tournier, sugar refiner, learned to his cost. Tournier lost 7890 francs in place of which he discovered a victory communiqué: 'Had we had the requisite

time at the countess's, we would have done the same to her. Regards to all. Attila. Post-Scriptum: Forcing method patented.'

Then, without too much trouble, he clandestinely crossed the frontier that was a lot more accessible than today. And he renewed his contacts with the Spanish militants. This time he was bringing them, not earthly sustenance but considerable spiritual manna. Not that he had any faith in the power of words. He was mistrustful of ideology. He was all too well aware of the futility of discussions by which nothing was solved. He believed that only action achieved anything. But in this instance he had family news to pass on to the exiles.

In the course of his travels he found himself in the home of the mayor of Santiago de Compostela, a sympathiser, whom he had visited on his first trip. Then, they had talked in general terms about an amazing scheme which had at the time seemed impracticable to them: stealing, for the good of the Cause, the solid gold four hundred kilo statue of Saint James which towered over the main altar of the church, a brazen affront to poverty. This time Alexandre had a plan all ready. All that was needed was that the mayor do nothing, and it might proceed.

In Cassis, he was to steal a cutter. Along with two confederates, he would bring it into the port of Bilbao. From there the trio would make its way to Santiago, capture the statue, break it up into small sections and ship it to the cutter on a cart, having dressed up as peasants. The mayor enthused about what he saw as a superb anticlerical stunt. And he in fact despised the curate.

However, he saw fit to speak his excitement to his two daughters, whom he believed to be as liberated from religious belief as himself, these screamed with horror at the plan to mutilate the idol. Stealing the statue was fine. Basically, they had no objection to that. But they were against its being broken up: after such a moral sin, they would wind up burning in hell fire. A whole night's argument failed to shake their opinion. They threatened to report their own father.

Alexandre left the mayor beside himself with fury. Spain was a land of savages. He swore to himself that he would not be back again.

In Toulon, a letter from his mother awaited him: it was addressed to one Juste Meunier at the Bar des Glaces in the place Puget. It contained some rude news: several comrades had been arrested by the police and Morel was among them, his accomplice in the pawnshop job. Morel had revealed everything. Alexandre had been sentenced in his absence by the Marseilles assizes to 5 years' imprisonment plus a 3000 franc fine on 8 June.

By return of post he replied by advising Marie not to worry. He was about to pull off something that the newspapers would be talking about. As soon as he had succeeded, he would send money to her and the hapless comrades. For reasons of caution he would rather that Rose did not travel to join him.

The job was attempted along with an anarchist by the name of Manille. It involved the superb Lecompte jewellery store in the place d'Armi, whose boss was in the habit of going away regularly every weekend. He had to pass through the adjacent cafe, which was temporarily closed. Go down into the cellar and drill a hole in the dividing wall. Extraordinary mole's work, which kept him busy for more than 24 hours, only to come up in the wine cellar of the public prosecutor: the cellars of the two buildings were not on the same level!

Marie was desolated and worried by rumours current in Marseilles just then about possible treachery by rogues. She wrote him using their agreed code: every letter from the word PORTUGAISE which had the advantage of containing all five vowels and ten letters in all, were numbered 1 to 0. P was 1; O, 2; R, 3; T, 4 and so on. To this day this code is still employed by certain businessmen who do not want their customers to know their real sale prices. It may be deemed

lamentably straightforward, but the art of ciphering was in those days in its infancy and Jacob one of its pioneers. 'My dear nephew,' wrote Marie 'your uncle (a Marseille comrade it seems) would certainly like to see you, above all because, he has something very urgent to communicate to you concerning 734453 (Arthur, which is to say Roques). Having seen nothing in the press, I thought that you did not get the job you had mentioned (the jewellery store). Let me assure you that 3290 (Rose) would have liked to come. If, by any chance, you come across 734453, do nothing with him before you have learned what we have to say to you. You must realise that this is in your interest. Above all, do not worry whether you should send something to the young men who have fallen, who have turned bad (they had 'fallen' into prison), maybe you know of whom I mean to speak.'<sup>3</sup>

Alexandre took his mother's advice and went back to Béziers, where the De Cassagnes had displayed such hospitality. The Galabrunns, wealthy vine growers, were even more hospitable. Not only was the door to their cellar easy to open, but the opening of the ground floor safe proved child's play to the new expert who had joined him. It had contained no less than 22,000 francs in cash and 200,000 in easily convertible earner bonds. What is more, there was the most delicate touch, a purse packed with gems of great value. It was a huge haul.

But infinitely less of a sensation than it should have been: he learned from the following day's papers of the existence in the cellar of another two safes containing two million francs. Two million: that represented entire truckloads of arms, and daily papers! Notwithstanding his theories about inequality of wealth he had never imagined that one individual could possess such a sum. At that level, money became an obstruction, almost. How many thousands of starveling wretches did that represent?

He told Rose about it in Montecarlo, where they were united once more. Two million! He could not forgive himself for having so stupidly let it slip through his fingers.

'You'll do better next time,' she encouraged him. 'For a novice you have not done at all badly. Your mother is very proud of you.'

To tell the truth, she had not ever believed that he might one day be in a position to meet their needs. She had taken him for a child. Now, in view of his daring, tenacity and above his kindness, it was just one surprise after another. She had given in to him a little because of her kind-heart, a little out of weakness and largely out of weariness. By way of showing her gratitude at his showing an interest in her. Out of loneliness too. Now she was deeply, deeply attached to this young man barely more than a teenager yet so mature. She obeyed him without so much as a second thought. He saw to everything, just as he had promised. He decided on everything. Thought of everything. Even of offering her flowers... roses, of course... something no one had ever done with her. He was so insistent and so zealous in his insistence that he would change the world that she wound up finding the whole thing quite natural. He had grand dreams. But he acted big too. His uncommon liveliness knew no pause. How long ago they seemed, her stays in Monaco with Clarenson, and the arguments after a luckless evening on the tables!

Alexandre took her to the Casino. Sat at the roulette tables. But risked only a little money. Dressed like a gentleman, he observed the high society he so despised. And mused. How could he get his hands on a little of their insolent wealth?

Fossati's arrival got him out of difficulty. One evening, just at the time when the stakes were beginning to be raised, and the croupier was calling out: 'No more bets,' Alexandre fell back in

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<sup>3</sup> This letter was discovered in Jacob's room by the police in 1899.

the throes of an epileptic fit as unexpected as it was spectacular. Maybe the idea had come to him while thinking about Clarenson and of the illness by which his father was beset. The fact is that the ploy worked perfectly: while the crowd gathered around him as he sprawled on the ground, the Italian scooped up everything he could lay hands on.

Scarcely had he been discharged from the hospital where they had taken him than Alexandre raced to the rendezvous point arranged with his accomplice: there was no one there. He waited an hour to no avail.

Then he had to face facts, he had been double-crossed. This made him mad. It was the same icy wrath he had felt when his father beat his mother or when the boatswain had humiliated him in front of everyone. The same urge to kill. He found injustice physically unbearable.

‘It had to happen,’ Rose told him philosophically in the inn, ‘Marie is forever telling you: you attract people to you who are not sufficiently dependable.’

Saying not a word he took his Browning out of a suitcase, checked that it was loaded and slipped it into his jacket. Then ordered her to go and wait for him in Toulon.

He jumped a train for Italy. Fossati, dishonest but naive, had spoken to him at length of his future plans in his native city, should the job succeed. And so Alexandre made straight for Naples.

Here there are two versions of events. According to the first, Fossati had already been murdered by another of his victims by the time Jacob arrived. If this hypothesis is true, Alexandre surely bemoaned this unfortunate coincidence. The second hypothesis, according to which Alexandre murdered Fossati, even if it has not been shown to be true, is more in keeping with his temperament. Normally tenderhearted and easy-going, he was nonetheless not a man to let an affront go unpunished.

In point of fact on the return journey he had money enough to lend 100 francs to a comrade from Toulon who was in especially dire straits. This generosity cost him dear. The ‘comrade’ was yet another spy, one of the many operating in libertarian circles. Alexandre had scarcely set foot in Toulon when a horde of police pounced on him.

Had it happened out in the open to militants of the first magnitude like Sebastian Faure, Louise Michel and Matha, being accosted by a police inspector in some railway station or knowing that the lecture halls were packed with spies would have been merely a slight inconvenience and an inevitability to boot. But it was painful to find oneself the victim of a nark just when one was throwing oneself into clandestine activity. Leca had sold him out in the business of the explosives for a handful of francs: Morel had named him for the pawnshop job: the anarchist from Aix had sold him out over the notary: and Fossati had betrayed him. Now he was behind bars for having done a favour to someone who had passed himself off as a friend. Marie had been right: he was surrounded by untrustworthy people. But how was it to be changed?

He could hardly ask comrades for stamped references showing them to be members of the group and at the same time oppose any sort of centralism and bureaucracy. Derelicts, the wretched victims of society could hardly be regarded as the only valid revolutionary force and at the same time denied acceptance. Nor could demands be made of a man in need when hospitality was at all times a duty. Then again, the systematic openness of all anarchist circles undoubtedly played into police hands. By the time a provocateur was exposed it was too late. They could always be taken out, but by then they would have done their filthy work.

Jacob in his cell pondered this question above all others. But other more pressing concerns immediately crowded in on him. Morel’s deposition was crucial to the framing of the indictment.

Monsieur Gille would assuredly recognise him. This time, there was no way of avoiding another guilty verdict.

Yet he had still so much work to do for the revolution... So many friends awaited him in every city in France... No, he, Alexandre Marius Jacob, could not resign himself to languishing on damp straw like some common criminal... A solution had to be found.

Remembering the imaginative Clarenson helped him a second time. He had been locked up barely a few hours when he took off his cap and ate it.

The warder was dumbfounded. As were the magistrates when they saw him recoil on the chair, terrified at the sight of them, before throwing himself at their feet, wringing his hands with wild eyes, beseeching them not to have him burned.

Aix prison to which he was promptly removed, turned into a real Babylon in just a few days. Prisoner Jacob spent the night ranting: ghastly Jesuits in black vestments, especially, haunted him, aiming to roast him on a spit. Nobody could get any sleep. His cell neighbours hammered on the walls with every object that came to hand. A tiny group of anarchists, including one Joseph Ferrand, who had just been arrested for stealing, were in on the plot. They made a hellish din. Making enough screaming noise for a thousand.

Most, ignorant of what was afoot, aped their example and created an uproar. The distracted gaolers scuttled hither and thither.

Jacob was placed in the underground cells. Given a nice cold shower. They bundled him into a straitjacket. It was rough.

He received his lawyer on his knees in the middle of the cell, absorbed in his Pater Noster, which he broke off only to yelp with terror at the sight of him. The man could get nothing else out of him.

He embraced and kissed the cheeks of the prison director whom he hailed as his saviour: in no time at all, the three psychiatrists who examined his case pronounced him incurably afflicted with mystical delirium. Marie, tipped off by Ferrand who was less closely watched, turned up to confirm that her poor son (she had not told this to anyone else up to that time) was a complete imbecile.

The army, who had intended to avail of these circumstances to lay hands on him, since he had failed to present himself for military service, resigned themselves to letting him slip. In addition, the medical certificates submitted by Marie, who had held on to them ever since the "fevers" of Dakar and which had been endorsed by fresh examinations, banished all doubts: the subject was in poor health. Tuberculous for sure. Probably would not survive long. Alexandre, firmly resolved never to perform his military service, could in fact, on the basis of this diagnosis, have avoided being classified as a draft-dodger.

Finally on 29 June 1899, the jury of the Aix-en-Provence assizes, irked by this queer man possessed decided, before confirming the existing five year sentence passed on him in his absence, to place him in an asylum for observation... The Mont-Perril asylum in Marseilles.

There the shower and the straight jacket were regarded as the cures for all ills. The regime was severe. However, Alexandre wrestled for all his might against the assailing Jesuits: it was too late now to go back.

A nurse by the name of Royère showed himself extremely understanding towards this new, eccentric patient. He confided to him that he too had no love for the priests, although he kept his dislike within more reasonable limits. After that, Jacob sounded him out, discreetly. Royère confessed his sympathies for anarchism. He mentioned enough specific references, names, places

and dates so that Alexandre was convinced, and Alexandre then took a chance and let him in on the truth.

Royère was out of the ordinary. He advised the faker to exaggerate his fits. To turn violent, if need be. He offered advice on how to behave before the doctors, warders and other inmates. The aim to be achieved at all costs was to have oneself locked up in the deranged sector inside a padded cell. A spell there would be hard, but at least Jacob would be on his own and nearer the perimeter wall. Royère would also take charge of ensuring that contact was maintained with Marie for any purposes.

And so the great day arrived. Alexandre bit anybody who came close to him. The Jesuits were more numerous and fiercer than ever. In the parlatory he acted out the charade so convincingly with his mother that the next day Royère had his work cut out to convince her that it had indeed been faking.

It was a protracted, onerous, painful experiment. But he managed to achieve his object. Above all, Marie began to receive medical bulletins pitched somewhere between alarmed and sceptical. Tremendously anxious, she no longer knew what to fear more: that her son might genuinely go crazy, or that his feigning might be discovered. One of the letters received from the director of Mont-Perril dated 14 January 1900, has come down to us! 'Monsieur Jacob's condition is unchanged. He believes himself persecuted by the Jesuits, suffers from hallucinatory visions and wishes no mention to be made of his family. Monsieur Jacob is under observation and we are not at all certain that we have identified the nature of his delirium.'

The doctors were not even sure three months later, when 'Monsieur Jacob' was still not discharged from the asylum. So far as he was concerned time had not passed at all. Nor had it for Rose and Marie.

Marie had embarked upon an intense drive to prepare her husband psychologically. 'They've locked your son up in an asylum. They want to pass him off as mad and you say nothing!'—she told him. 'You'd rather play manille with your mates!'

Joseph felt uncomfortable. He no longer had any taste for anything. He led a miserable and feckless existence between the house and the drugstore and then on to the cafe. Despite the Pernod which he drank like a fish, he was shaken at the idea of his child among the mentally deranged. An unknown feeling slowly warmed its way between the clouds of alcohol: a sense of blame.

Of the many Marseilles comrades of her son, Marie spared no effort in recruiting the pair she considered the most dependable. This selected general staff would meet regularly of an evening around the sketches made by Alexandre and passed on by Royère. The necessary material was very soon amassed. Joseph withdrew into a corner during these get-togethers with the increasing feeling of uselessness, that he was pathetic and contemptible. One evening, at the most unexpected juncture, he suddenly got to his feet:

'Count me in,' he said, blushing with unexpected shyness.

After a moment's amazement, he was made a fuss of. Marie hugged him... something that had not happened for some time. And she was weeping: something she did day and daily.

And so it was that on the night of 18–19th April, 1900, a gig carrying three people headed towards Mont Perril. It drew up some distance from the asylum. One of the men stayed near the buggy on lookout duty. The other two scaled the perimeter wall at the agreed spot, thanks to a ladder which they had brought along as instructed. They climbed down into the courtyard and used it to clamber on to the roof, across which they followed the trail prescribed.

At the agreed hour, they smashed the glass in the window on the ceiling of Alexandre's cell... the only access, aside from the door. Losing no time, they fed in a knotted rope.

The glass had made a tremendous din as it crashed on to the floor. A warder rushed to the spot. He opened the Judas-hole, surveyed the scene and began to unlock the cell door. The game was up. Jacob would face at least five years in solitary. And a ban on residence. Perhaps even assigned residence in Cayenne. Then, displaying that sang froid which sets great leaders apart, Jacob called out:

'Throw me the revolver...'

Then, pretending to have really received a gun...

'Thanks! I've got it...'

The warder froze in his tracks. Alexandre grasped the rope. He shinned up it as quickly as he could, cutting himself on some glass splinters on his way out, galloped across the roofs, jumped down to ground level, scaled the perimeter wall along with his two confederates, as shrill whistle blasts rent the air and, bleeding all over, fell into the buggy with his arms around his father.

The following day, dressed as a joiner and disguised with a beard, with a little money in his pocket and perfectly in order documents made out to one Jean Concorde he turned up in Sète at the home of Caserio's friend, Sorel. Inspector Fabre, mounting another raid on the Jacob home, found there a couple of peaceable small shopkeepers amazed to learn of their son's escape. As for the courts, all they could do was to take note officially of the break-out and sentence him in his absence to a year's imprisonment on 22nd November 1900 for '...aggravated vagrancy'.

# The Hundred and Fifty 'Crimes' of the Other

## Arsène Lupin

### I

Seated on a bench in the shade of the little house, Concorde listened attentively as Sorel talked about Caserio. That young Italian baker, a skinny, wan, long-faced Pierrot of sorts had also been twenty years old when he had sought refuge in Sète, coming from Geneva and then Lyons. He too had been a rebel, he too adored his mother and his friends. He too dreamed of pulling off some great feat. By the time he came to take the train for Lyons without a word to anyone, having first bought himself a dagger along the way, in Montpellier, none had any inkling of his plans, not even Sorel.

'You've have the head of Vaillant: we'll have yours, president CARNOT!' an anarchist poster had proclaimed. Caserio had kept the promise made by others. But, for all that, had the workers risen up? The Marseilles comrades had dreamt of a blood-letting: 'Rest assured that we have already made preparations to avenge you,' one of them had written him. Vengeance will be carried out anon and it will be terrible. The beginning of my letter has been written in my own blood, so that, hemmed in by those barbaric executioners, you may see yet again some human blood, a blood which cries for vengeance to its comrades...' Nothing had come of it. Bitterness. Silence, disappointment. A hint of resentment. Sorel laboured this point. Seeing Concorde stroke the dog he had inherited from Caserio with an emotion that he reckoned could be unsettling, Sorel sometimes wondered whether this young fellow was not going to go the same way.

In fact, Alexandre was still thinking along the lines he had begun to ponder in the asylum. Hitherto, he had been an inspired amateur rather than a revolutionary in what he did. There had been a flurry of some spectacular actions, quite well organised in terms of detail, but without any set object other than to return blow for blow. An impulsive, unselfish and utterly ineffective rebelliousness. He had not done anarchy any disservice: but nor had he changed the world either. The 'Great Day' would never get here if everybody dissipated his energies like that without doing anybody else any good.

What he gradually came to discover of the recent turn of events from a variety of comrades met by chance on his travels was scarcely grounds for optimism.

In February 1899, at the *Journal du Peuple*, the Dreyfusard daily which had so preoccupied Malato during his last trip through Marseilles, all of the militants, from collectivists to individualists, from Pelloutier and Delessale through to Janvion, Degaldès, Grandidier or Guérineau had lined up solidly behind Sébastien Faure. Octave Mirbeau and Laurent Tailhade had launched into the usual tirades. To begin with, the anarchists had made good headway. Even their enemies had had to acknowledge that they alone were pugnacious and organised enough to protect reunions and meetings against the onslaughts of anti-Dreyfusards. They had been seen in action,



notably, at the monster meetings in Auteuil and Longchamps in June. Dreyfus's pardon, obtained in September in the wake of the Rennes trial, was largely their doing.

Since then, unfortunately, internal squabbles had prevented their reaping the fruits of such a glowing success. Anarchy had slipped into chaos.

As far as Jean Grave and his *Temps Nouveaux* were concerned Dreyfus was still, scandal or no scandal, a bourgeois and a soldier to boot. Consequently *l'Affaire Dreyfus* was absolutely no concern of theirs. Let the rich turn on one another, let them regale the people with the spectacle of their jiggery-pokery and their ignominies: the place of militants was on the sidelines, sneering at these petty dramas.

Janvion retorted that at that rate one should fold one's arms and await a golden age that would never arrive—an attitude into which Grave was starting cosily to be lulled. Dreyfus was not a bourgeois any more, but a convict on Devil's island. Militants had a duty to defend him as well as to seize upon any eventuality likely to mobilise public opinion as an opportunity to increase their influence and make new recruits.

Not that Janvion was in agreement with Sébastien Faure either. According to him, Faure had been quite right to hurl himself into the fray—and quite in the wrong in having been unable to impose the anarchist world-view upon it. In order to champion Dreyfus, Faure had adopted the 'tone of a sentimental nanny'. He had succumbed to infection and his *Journal du Peuple* had had 'overtones of unadulterated republican lyricism'.

'Those criticisms may not be entirely wrong,' Matha told Jacob when they ran across each other in Lyons. 'Faure at least has been the only one to commit himself completely and, as such, he is the only one to have been sensible to certain matters.'

Matters that could be summed up in just one word: money. Three months after Dreyfus's pardon, the *Journal du Peuple*, with debts of 100,000 francs, ceased publication. Even then, it had been bailed out several times by subsidies which anarchist circles would have been hard pressed to raise. To tell the truth, it would never have seen the light of day but for the Jews and the Freemasons. Had a deal been struck? Perhaps the paper's columns had been thrown open to republicans, temporary allies and financial backers.

'But,' Matha sighed, 'without those, there would not have been anything at all. Furthermore, it was very lucky for us that we had their support in the campaign on behalf of the comrades deported to Cayenne. In *L'Aurore*, Henry Leyret waged a campaign for a general amnesty for our friends. The '*Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*' which, as I well know, is an offshoot of the '*Grand Orient*', has helped us secure the release of five of our people. Cyvoct is indebted to them for his life. Monod is stone blind, but in France thanks to them and Liard-Courtois had them to thank for having avoided an extra 5 year term. That being so, I cannot see my way clear to censuring Sébast. Obviously, if we were well enough to shift for ourselves, that would change everything...'

Faure had been accused of flirting with freemasonry. It seemed likely that he had done just that. Was that an act of treachery? In fact several comrades had just discovered through the joint campaign waged on Dreyfus's behalf that masonry was not at all like the caricature of itself that was current. In the "*Grand Orient*" they came across people open to new ideas. In the "*Grand Orient*" the "Great Architect of the Universe" had been done away with: and they no longer took oaths upon the Bible. They campaigned against racism, against the clergy, against simpering rentiers and holy Joes. After their fashion, they worked for man's happiness. Believed in possible improvement of the lot of the wretched. There was nothing dishonourable in any of that.

'I can understand how Laurent Tailhade could have been seduced by it,' Matha was saying. 'Like Charpentier and Gustave Hervé, to name but two apart from Faure, about whom we were pretty certain. Then again, wasn't Proudhon himself a mason?'

What is more, it was not one-way traffic. Through these new recruits, several rue Cadet lodges in turn had discovered libertarian ideas. Those initiates who took to heart the first pledge required of them, may they 'be free and of good habits' might appreciate the exacting nature of the anarchist ideal. The partisans of the black flag were not the horde of bloodthirsty savages they had been painted. All in all, the whole thing might prove beneficial.

Alexandre's uncompromising nature found these tactical considerations hard to accommodate. Not having been involved in the fray, he had not soiled his hands in the course of it.

'Masons are republicans,' he protested to Matha. 'Every year they pay their respects to the president of the Republic. They make no secret of having devised laws which we despise. They are reformists who profit by the system, albeit while aiming to be able to improve it: as if the exploiters were about to surrender their privileges other than with a knife to their throats!'

Matha's answer was that maybe he was right, but that since December, since Faure, wounded by the attacks from Grave and his cohorts had abandoned *Le Libéraire* to him, to go off on his own to launch *La Plébéienne*, since the 'apostle' no longer topped up the debts with the earnings of his lecture tours, the production of every new issue posed an insoluble problem. 2,000 copies, when the review should have had a print run of 200,000 or 2,000,000. Did Alexandre realise what that meant? Activist zeal and the beauty of the ideal could not make up for the meagreness of their funds.

Alexandre understood perfectly. His days as a typesetter and his term with *L'Agitateur* afforded him a fair insight into the point.

When Malato alerted him to a pretty similar alarm signal, his mind was made up once and for all: at the core of all their worries lay... money.

That was when the *idea* sprouted in his brain. He immediately spelled it out to his friend. Once he had recovered from his initial surprise, the latter turned it over in his mind's eye. He voiced his objections: but it seemed to hold up.

It was quite simply a question of orchestrating the individual retrievals on such a scale that the balance of forces would really be altered inside society. Of industrialising robbery from the bourgeois robbers instead of leaving it up to artisans. First of all with an eye to impoverishing them. And then to give a fillip to the means of propaganda, which would fend off the need to have recourse to republicans and other Freemasons—and that was to say nothing of the delight that would derive from a revolution paid for with the enemy's gold. And meeting his own needs, by the way, as well as those of the most unfortunate comrades. And above all, to show the people, through example, that respect for blessed property was a delusion. Whereupon the idea would spread like wildfire. Two or three hundred comrades, suitably trained and organised, would be enough to loot the whole of France. The Republic would not be able to withstand it. The anarchists ... wealthy, powerful, armed, would irresistibly draw the people into the breach. With a thousand, every State in Europe could be dismantled, replaced at last by the direct democracy of workers' and peasants' councils.

This scheme may seem harebrained. In fact, the outcome was not plain from the start. Jacob had taken the implementation of his scheme further than might be supposed from a reading of the *Mallet Isaac* in which he does not figure. In 1906 a certain Joseph Stalin, holding up the Tiflis bank with bombs and revolver in the company of the Georgian terrorist Kamo, nicknamed the

'bandit of the Caucasus' was to net 341,000 gold roubles for the Bolshevik cause and change the face of the world.

In the year 1900, theft looked upon as a justified expropriation had been ennobled for some 14 years, ever since Clément Duval, the activist *enragé* of the *Panthère des Batignolles*. Apprehended the first time with a hand in a station-master's satchel, Duval had committed a further offence, out of pure idealism, in the mansion of one Madame Herbelin.

'I arrest you in the name of the law,' a policeman promptly informed him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

'And I abolish you in the name of freedom!' retorted Duval, plunging his dagger into the policeman's chest.

Arrested, though, he had then made a statement: 'As I see things, I am not a robber. In creating man, Nature gave him the right to live and man has the duty to exercise that right in full. So if society fails to provide him with the wherewithal to survive, the human being is entitled to seize what he needs from wherever there is plenty.'

At the Assizes he had still gone further: 'Ah, if only I were at large again, I should blow you all up! Blowing you up, that's what the money was set aside for!', he had burst out. The president had had him removed. The jury had passed sentence of death upon him. At that very instant, he had been promoted to hero status. Louise had roused public opinion and summoned all Paris to his execution, scheduled for the place de la Roquette. Certain people had even talked of cutting the executioner's throat in return: and then Jules Grévy had seen fit to commute his sentence to penal servitude for life<sup>1</sup>.

Alexandre saw eye to eye with Malato in admiring the vigour of this diehard stance. While not, of course, overlooking its naivete: for even though Duval might have wanted to 'blow it all up', his own unaided efforts would have been as derisory as the 50,000 francs recently gobbled up by the Spanish quagmire.

Moreover the final falling-out between Marxists and anarchists had its origins precisely in that Duval affair. 'Let a man steal whenever he is hungry, when his dependants will go hungry—and this is not the case with Duval—and we certainly will not cast the first stone. But we will not confuse this action of personal or family self-preservation with a forward-looking broadside,' Jules Guesde had pronounced from the columns of *Le Cri du Peuple*. Alexandre, of course, considered that a typically *authoritarian* reaction which looked for discipline even in the 'vanguard' and, while seeking the overthrow of the bourgeois State, found time to admire at least a certain notion of order about it. If those people were to gain the upper hand some day, they would saddle the people with a closed system wherein regimentation would take the place of free choice and statistics that of individuality.

As for the objection voiced by Séverine, that admirable woman, wholly committed to the defence of the poor and oppressed and who regarded herself as the spiritual heiress of Jules Vallès—and according to whom theft was supposedly... 'such as to alienate the hesitant from us, strike fear into the simple and terrify the timid'—Alexandre dismissed that with one wave of his hand: if his plan turned out to be practicable, the hesitant would instead draw nearer, the simple gain confidence and the timid assuredly be transformed into tigers!

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<sup>1</sup> Duval escaped from Cayenne in 1901. He was able to get to the United States. He published his *Memoirs* and died in 1935 without ever having been mentioned again excepting in 1913 when he came out sensationally in favour of the 'Bonnot Gang'.

Theft was legitimate. All anarchists were agreed on that point: the austere Jean Grave, Sébastien Faure, for all his Masonic friendships: the gentle Elisée Reclus himself, the much admired geographer who asserted.. ‘It is no bad thing that Duval’s voice should have reminded us all, moralists and moralisers alike, that we too live by theft and plunder..’ With a great or lesser degree of vigour and panache, everybody vied with everybody else to adapt to his temperament the injunction which had recently appeared in the *ça ira*: ‘Loot and pillage, that’s for you!... There are not ten roads to follow, there is but one way of setting an example, getting down immediately to the business of snatching their fortress back from the rich!’

After Duval, after Pini and Parmeggiani, after Ortiz, after the numberless host of nonentities who had engaged in individual retrievals, Alexandre wanted to go one better. With him, theft would no longer be some wildcat revolt, but a revolutionary tactic.

During the return journey back to the Midi, he read and reread a little book lent to him by Malato, a book which had been written by a comrade named Georges Adrien alias Darien *le Voleur* (Darien ‘the Thief’), published three years earlier without much success. Despite a few overly Romanesque passages and overly romantic individualistic flights of fancy occasionally forgetful of socialism, there were ideas in it which were worth the borrowing...<sup>2</sup>

When Alexandre stepped out on to the railway station in Montpellier, his battle plan was all drawn up. He promptly set about acting upon it with all the rigour and daring of a sort of Napoleon of thieving.

Step one: he put his savings into becoming the manager of a hardware store in Montpellier. He put it in Rose’s name, she being free of suspicion. In return for the tiresomeness of making the occasional sale of a few grammes of nails to some customers, this acquisition was a way of having himself sent strongboxes of every imaginable make one after another, for display. Thus, at his ease, he could spend his spare time studying their mechanisms. Into this he invested the same minute enthusiasm that he had expended upon seaman’s lore, typesetting and everyday affairs. Through the same channel, he obtained the most suitable tools for opening the boxes, tools which he painstakingly tried out and improved upon. Pliers, braces and saws of American manufacture, he was especially keen on: the New World was the pacesetter in technology.

Roques dropped in for training. Royère, who had hightailed it out of Mont-Perril as soon as he began to come under suspicion of having helped the Jesuits’ victim to escape, arrived to join them. Joseph Ferrand who had obtained Jacob’s new address from Marie, soon added to their ranks as soon as he was released from jail in Aix. There were many others as well: about a dozen in all, whose names we choose not to recall, insofar as they were lucky enough to slip through the net of the courts and the police.

Rose prepared meals for everybody. In the evenings, after reviewing their latest lessons, they got down to the practical side of things.

To ensure that the members of the little band passed unnoticed during the travels up and down the Côte d’Azur, Jacob also purchased a second-hand clothes business. In anything from smoking-jacket to painter’s smock, not forgetting priestly robes or the uniform of a captain of the hussars, each of them was thus able to kit himself out from top to toe according to his requirements or

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<sup>2</sup> Auriant, Darien’s remarkable biographer (see especially his *Darien et l’inhumaine comédie*, published by Jérôme Martineau) claims that Darien himself never stole anything. However, one cannot help thinking, when reading his account of certain house-breakings that there are details there that one could never have invented out of thin air—not even with genius.

whims. No detail was left to chance. Commendations from the legion of honour accompanied their decorations.

After a faltering start, Alexandre also learned to turn out identity cards and phoney passports that could pass off for the real thing, to order. So much so that every member of the band was in possession of several complete alter ego's. The clean shaven abbé Royère would pop into the shop on a Monday only to call back on Tuesday as Lieutenant Royère complete with regalia and on the Wednesday as a moustached plasterer. Jacob himself carried his disguises away in a briefcase before changing into them on the outskirts of Montpellier in some railway station toilet or in the darkness of the countryside.

That summer there was a rash of burglaries right along the Mediterranean coast from Nice to Perpignan. Without a doubt, they raided a considerable number of villas. But they took such a welter of precautionary measures that the courts were subsequently able to pin only one burglary on Alexandre, the one committed between 17 and 23 July in the Sète home of Maître Torquebiau, a Montpellier lawyer, at 27 Quai de Bône. That one, moreover, had been a splendid display of expertise: the raiders, clambering on to the roof via the skylight of an adjoining house, had stealthily removed the blind of a shutter from its hinges, smashed a window pane and clambered down a small portable ladder to the ground.

The safe had been laid on a mattress, there to be forced noiselessly. Netted were numerous jewels, bonds from the City of Paris and from the Crédit foncier, bonds from the Exposition of 1900 and Panama Canal. Upwards of 40,000 francs in all. Not to mention a diploma of doctor of laws which Alexandre held on to '...because one never knows'.

— *Why did you steal that diploma?*

— *I was already working on my defence!*

The bonds were quickly to be cashed in Paris with Lestiboudois, a stockbroker's.

We know of at least one other exploit dating from this period: at the home of the Marquis de Forbin. The job went awry. Some servants whose presence had not been anticipated, woke up and armed themselves with hunting pieces. Alexandre managed to scarper as far as a small copse of pines as the bell of the private chapel began to sing out. The nearby village was alerted. A hue and cry was organised. From everywhere, men popped up, trailing behind dogs. The game was up.

Then, like the Marshal de Luxembourg putting Holland to the torch, he struck a match and set the surrounding brush ablaze. With the flames licking at his trousers, he set off on a breathless run. Within seconds, the copse had become a raging inferno. What he had counted upon had happened: his pursuers, panicking at the sight of the blaze, gave up on flushing him out into the open. He was able to make good his escape at his leisure.

'But,' he used to say when telling the story, 'was I hot!'...

Once his technique had been polished to perfection, he decided to 'go up' to Paris. In fact his popularity had become too much of a hindrance in the closed circuit of the Mediterranean comrades. The capital's anonymity, provided it was diligently preserved, would be more suited to his activities.

Moreover, why confine himself to the territories of Languedoc when his scheme of subversion targeted the whole of France? The main leaders, the biggest newspapers, the point of departure for the railway lines...all these were located in Paris.

Towards the end of 1900, after several test-runs, he took lodgings with Rose in a modest hotel in the rue de la Clef in the fifth arrondissement, between the Jardin des Plantes and the Place de

la Contrescarpe at no18, rue de la Clef. Thériez, the landlord had no liking for the police with whom he had already tangled on two or three occasions. While not genuinely revolutionary, he sympathised with anarchist ideas and often went along to local meetings. His business was faring poorly. He had only one customer, a girl by the name of Gabrielle Damiens, one of those wretched girls who whiled their lives away on the pavements of Paris, devoid of hope, morals and money. All of which guaranteed Thériez's discretion, the only virtue expected of him. Arriving one after another, the people from Marseilles came to represent for the dump a prosperity which it had not known for some considerable time.

At the time, Paris was in the final weeks of the World Exposition whose countless mentions were huddled together from the Trocadéro capital down to the Pont Alexandre III. A tremendous architectural delirium had invaded the banks of the Seine, overshadowed by Monsieur Eiffel's metal tower done up in yellow paint and flanked by a gigantic, heavenly sphere. A monumental gate surmounted by a ghastly statue supposedly representing 'la Parisienne'. At the end of the Champs-de-Mars lay the Big Wheel: on the Trocadéro hill a huddle of colonial villages—Algerian, Senegalese, Cochin Chinese: and an electric train and two moving walkways glided alongside a jumble of Serbian domes, Persian and Turkish follies, Greek cupolas, modernistic buildings, sprawling higgledy-piggledy, and rising out of the sprawl, all of a sudden, the 160 metres of medieval housing from Old-Paris, reconstructed by Robida: all of this conspired to bedazzle a poor provincial. The pont Alexandre III had been inaugurated: the avenue Alexandre III, thrusting across the gardens of the Champs Elysees and flanked by the Petit and the Grand Palais, wended its regal way as far as les Invalides.

Despite the bottlenecks caused by the circulation of fifty thousand horse-drawn carriages and the odd horseless carriage, the tram lines every day reverberated to the concerto of curses from the river-bank dwellers. The no 1 metro line, from the Port de Vincennes to the Port Maillot, had been operating without a hitch since July. Les Invalides and Versailles were connected by the first French electrical rail-line. The gare d'Orsay and the Palais d'Orsay had just been completed.

Every day upwards of 150,000 people drawn from every corner of the globe trotted along to the Exposition. They had had the Sultan of Constantinople, the Shah-in-Shah, whose companion Salsou had stupidly bungled his assassination bid, the kings of Holland, Belgium, Rumania, England, Sweden, Cambodia and Greece: a sumptuous procession.

Every evening, or almost, there were firework displays, light shows, nocturnal and 'Venetian' entertainment on the Seine, in an orgy of flaming torches, gas burners and projectors courtesy of the Faery Electricity. The dress balls at the Opéra, each one more resplendent than the last, drew the cream of Europe's courts towards the City of Lights. It was not merely a matter of the new outfits of the spectacular Caroline Otero, nor of the latest lover brought to ruination by Liane de Pougy, nor of Cléo de Mérode's boudoir; nor of the possible bankruptcy of the extravagant Boni de Castellane, of the affairs of honour between Baron de Rothschild and the Comte de Lubersac; of the million donated by la Castellane, néé Gould, to charitable works; of the map of France studded with gemstones, presented to President Loubet by the Russian ambassador; of the dinner laid on by the same Loubet for the 22,000 mayors of France and which stretched for a kilometre into the gardens of the Orangerie; of the garden-parties of the Elysée; of the works of genius of Catulle Mendès, François Coppée, Willy, Gyp, François de Curel, Marcel Prévost, Jean Lorrain, Paul Hervieu, Sardou, Sully Prudhomme, Heredia, Bornier; of the competitive elegance at Vincennes; of the games of polo, golf and lawn tennis; of the steeplechasing and 'drags': this was the *Belle Époque*.

Alexandre was struck by only one thing: in the midst of these “republican” splendours the government had been able to find time only to pass a single socialist law: it forbade the bosses to employ women and under 18s for more than eleven hours a day. 66 hours’ toil a week: it really was a *Belle Époque*!

At the end of a month’s stay in the capital, his diffidence turned into loss of heart and thence into nausea: every year 150,000 people perished of tuberculosis attributable to poverty—not to mention the frightening infant mortality rate in the suburbs—but the 120,000,000 francs needed to finance the Exposition had been forthcoming from the public exchequer and from private donors. All of the masterpieces of the mind were represented there: all of the inventions of man’s ingenuity were on display. But with bland insolence the exploiters had appropriated them to themselves as if they were their own personal creations, for the purpose of turning them into an entertainment for goggle-eyed rubbernecks, in an orgy of stucco, frills, plush, lace, satin, tail-coats, ready cash, brocaded princes, grand dukes with serfs by the hundred thousand, and bewitching courtesans. The whole thing had been created by the people. It all belonged to the people. Had been stolen from them. The very creations of their drudgery were snatched away from them! And the people were content! They applauded the parading scoundrels and military tattoos! They did not rise up upon learning, say, that every week on the Friday they were disbarred from entering *their* Expo, so that it might be reserved for rich people requiring 5 tickets instead of just one! If no revolt was forthcoming, Jacob chose to believe it was because, amid the din of proclamations, the carnival cacophony, the orgy of uniforms, the unctuous symphony from the big newspapers which all hammered home the same message into one’s brain:—‘...Behold and wonder, people, at the splendour for which you foot the bill: drink deep, by proxy, of the champagne which your deputies have set aside for themselves!’—common-sense had naught at its disposal save a penny whistle with which to make its voice heard! And if that was not the correct explanation and if it was in the nature of the wretched to hold their phoney leaders in awe, then there was nothing for it but suicide or exile! But, no, the hypothesis was untenable.

With renewed anger he hurled himself into the organising of his little band of saboteurs. He divided France up into four territories according to the railroad services: the North, the West, the East, and the *Midi*. Essentially there was no question of putting his talents to work in Paris. There were too many police and too many narks around there: the population was too dense. In the provinces, by contrast, the representatives of the law were not able to call upon such a solid network of communications as they can today.

The contentions of Monsieur Bertillon who was doggedly perfecting his anthropometric system beneath the rafters of the Quai des Orfèvres, had not yet come into fashion. A bandit wanted in Nantes for murder and caught red-handed in the act of burglary in Verdun still stood every chance, provided that his new identity stood up, of being punished only for the latter offence.

The flow of information was very sluggish and parsimonious. No one had yet imagined that an evildoer might make so bold as to put together a gang of nationwide ramifications—and Monsieur Picard’s sleuths were to stumble upon the existence of the *Night Workers* only after Jacob wound up, almost by chance, behind bars. Indeed: they would never succeed in unearthing the vast ramifications of his conspiracy against the security of the State.

— *Why did you go housebreaking in the provinces?*

— *I was indulging in a little decentralisation.*

Two books soon became Alexandre’s bedside reading: the *Railway Timetable* which, for anyone with the slightest ability to decipher the schedules, made the most subtle geographical acrobatics

possible; and the *Bottin* directory, the delight of any snob listed within its pages—and a godsend for the ‘recovery man’ (*recupérateur*) on the lookout for likely addresses. Certain descriptions of the chateaux were a dream come true. It only remained to check them out on the spot.

Jacob’s declaration of war was on wealth, not men. To attack a bank—which, self-evidently, might have netted more loot, although the use of bank accounts had not yet become widespread—was to make it almost obligatory to unholster one’s revolver, and perhaps to open fire on innocent employees. A raid on an inhabited house carried the same risk. It was out of the question: but Stalin was not to display any such scruples.

However, they all reserved the right to defend themselves against the gendarmes as they saw fit. For his part, Alexandre declared his readiness, if need be, to follow the example of Etiévant, the erstwhile contributor to *Le Libertaire* who, being sought by police on account of his having been Ravachol’s accomplice, strolled along to the rue Berzélius police station, hacked the duty cop down with 22 stab wounds, stabbed another one 13 times, fired all chambers of his revolver at a third, and stated at his trial: ‘I do not cling to life. For me, it is made up solely of squalor. I realise that you do cling to it, gentlemen of the jury, and you, Monsieur Avocat-General, but it is indifferent to me and for my part I ask you not to credit me with any extenuating circumstances.’

By reason of these various considerations it became his habit to dispatch to the targeted town just one man, hands in pockets, less notable and less expensive than a compact group. The task of this scout was to slip some ‘wedges’ and ‘seals’, which is to say ordinary scraps of paper, into the gap in the doors of the most inviting residences. If, by 24 or 48 hours later, the scrap had not fallen to the ground, it meant that the premises were, temporarily at least, uninhabited. Whereupon the scout would send to Paris a telegram the contents of which were immaterial but which, if signed ‘Georges’, meant ‘Come two-handed’, or, if signed ‘Louis’, ‘Come three-handed’. Moreover, the first letter used indicated, according to an agreed code, the equipment to bring along. Thus, once having checked the ‘seals’ again, it only remained to pay the place a visit before catching the first early morning or night train for Paris.

One further detail: a lookout, in a deserted street at midnight might have attracted attention. Alexandre quickly came up with the Machiavellian and rustic notion of equipping himself with a toad whenever the weather made it advisable. The beast was left in a gutter outside the targeted premises. As long it continued its croaking they could rest easy: no intruder would have ventured into the vicinity. Once the croaking stopped, they had to pack up.

The choice of victim hinged upon one last criterion. No mercy for the coffers of the three parasites named by Cimourdin: the priest, the judge,<sup>3</sup> and the soldier: nor for the most obvious culprits of society’s injustice... the big rentiers, property-owners and other profiteers.

On the other hand, there would be immunity for those who had earned their money by their labours, provided those labours had been constructive, like those of doctors, architects, academics or writers. So it was that one day, after having gained entry in Rochefort to the sumptuous residence of a frigate captain, which was in fact the home of Pierre Loti, (the pen-name of Viaud), he promptly emptied the sacks he had just filled, carefully replacing each object and leaving in a prominent position a note which read: ‘Having gained entry to your home by mistake, I could take nothing from one who lives by his pen. All work is worthy of pay. Attila—P.S. Herewith ten francs for the broken glass and damaged shutter.’

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<sup>3</sup> Judges, often drawn from the upper bourgeoisie, generally had a substantial personal fortune in those days.



Alexandre also prescribed that the loot was to be shared out in accordance with a steadfast rule: each 'recovery man' was expected to turn over ten per cent of his swag to the Cause—the rest being used to cover his living costs or prepare the sorties to follow. The number of participants was generally set at three and so it was almost a third of the valuables stolen which was spent on propaganda. Alexandre himself kept back only the barest minimum for himself. On this score also, investigators will be dumbfounded to discover that this fellow who handled millions, and could have travelled by coach or De Dion down the path of the Bois, dined on the meagre fare of the one-franc mash-houses of the boulevard Voltaire and was not an habitué of the international palaces.

Certain specialists have even taken him to task for not having frequented the moneyed precincts which would doubtless have enabled him to increase his 'recoveries' ten times over. In this connection they cite the case of George Manolesco<sup>4</sup> who passed himself off successively as Prince Lahovary and the Duke of Otrante and netted no less than 40 million pounds sterling in his ten years 'working' the great hotels. But there can be no comparison between them. 1) Manolesco stole for himself; 2) His techniques consisted of cheating at cards or seducing duchesses with an eye to spiriting away their diamonds: One does not find Jacob playing the Casanova; 3) Manolesco, like Lupin, liked the 'high society' into which he had wormed his way. Jacob despised it to such an extent that the very idea of hobnobbing with it was enough to raise his hackles.

In short, his aim was straightforward: one does not fraternise with the enemy, not even on a temporary basis. One does not spy on him: one fights him and robs him. Let us also acknowledge the element of ignorance: what he knew of the world made it impossible for him to conceive of just how wealthy a Rothschild might be. For him, a Torquebiau or a Galabrun was the last word in capitalism.

This lack of perspective was to prove fatal as soon as it became a question of overturning the balance of power within society.

Be that as it may, those who refused, in individualism's name, to kowtow to the 10% rule were excluded from the gang. This was the case, notably, with Roques. Not that it brought him any luck: after a few successful jobs, he was arrested in Saintes in 1902 and sentenced to penal servitude for life by the assizes of Charente-Inférieure on charges of making and handling counterfeit money.

For a long time, the most elusive solution was the one to the difficulty of fencing stolen goods. Experience had taught Alexandre to be wary of receivers. There was no end to their treachery. They were prompted by no ideal other than the appetite for gain: so much so that they were quite capable of turning in their clients at the first hint of trouble. The crooks with whom he was led

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *L'arrestation d'Arsène Lupin*, page 3: 'Arsène Lupin, the eccentric gentleman who operates only in chateaux and drawing-rooms and who, one night when he had bungled the home of Baron Schormann, had left empty-handed and left behind his calling card, resplendent with the device: 'Arsène Lupin, gentleman-burglar, will come back when the furnishings are genuine.' In this particular, Jacob had the edge for elegance. Apart from the instance of the visit to Pierre Loti, one day he found himself in the home of a marquis whom he supposed to be filthy rich but whom he found to be deeply in debt, whereupon he went one better—far from robbing him, he left him 10,000 francs (30,000 revalued francs). The marquis, moreover, was a man of breeding: he failed to show up to testify at the trial.'

The 30 April 1903 issue of *Le Petit Parisien* noted indiscriminately about Jacob and his friends: 'Almost all the great thefts committed in churches, chateaux and wealthy villas on record in the main towns of France for almost the past two years may be attributed to this redoubtable band of lawbreakers.'

A propos of this, see *Le Prince des Voleurs* by J.J. Lynx (NRF 'L'air du Temps' 1965).

to have 'professional' dealings soon joined the exploiters in his popularity list: they were cynical, idle, cruel, dubious types... and reactionaries, to boot.

Bearer bonds involved scarcely any risk: it was a simple matter to sell them again to some stockbroker. Likewise, certain items, like clocks and watches, could be deposited without difficulty in pawnshops—albeit by taking heavy losses.

As far as precious stones and diamonds were concerned, he contacted in Amsterdam a number of diamond dealers who were never to give him cause for any complaint. His dealings with the Dutchmen even involved such a measure of trust that one director of Lloyd's who was, moreover, perfectly well aware of Alexandre's activities, named him as an expert on housebreaking, following a conversation which had continued until quite a late hour in the taverns of the Rembrandtsplein, during which discussion the insurance agent, out-argued, admitted that Alexandre's theories about property were perfectly tenable. Which undoubtedly denoted that the man had an exceptionally well-developed business sense, in that no one was better placed than Jacob to divine the *modus operandi* of a housebreaking.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of registered securities, Alexandre reckoned it might be easier to find buyers among the businessmen of North Africa or Egypt, since French bonds enjoyed a solid reputation in those days.

So it was that towards the end of 1900, he embarked, with Rose who was beginning to get bored under the Parisian drizzle, on a steamship which was making a tour of the Mediterranean. The trip was of no interest other than as a tourist outing. The prices he was offered for his merchandise were no better than the bids that had been forthcoming from the most grasping offices of Montmartre. Furthermore, in Cairo, a jewellery store which a commercial traveller had tipped him off about withstood his efforts: the servants passed the night sleeping outside the door. He consoled himself with visits to the Sphinx and Pyramids which he had admired from afar in his youth—again in the company of Rose, who was taken seasick on the back of the camel. Algiers brought no better luck, neither with the wine-growing moneylenders nor with the property of the Russian ambassador. Only the warrens of the casbah held any welcome for him.

So he then made for London. Darien had already sketched out the procedure: any and every Soho *fence* undertook to resell Russian loans or Treasury Bonds to Middle Eastern potentates, loyal subjects of Her Gracious Majesty, illiterate but greedy, for whom any sheet of printed paper from Europe assumed a talismanic value. That part of the setup was all arranged from the beginning of 1901 onwards. It seems that there was something in it for them all... burglar, go-between and petty potentate... since the commercial dealings between the *Night Workers* and London's low-life quickly became quite a regular business.

That left precious metals. What was to be done with the gold watches or heavy silver services which were particularly prized in these days when the white metal had not yet lost its value? There had been a lot of snags in this particular. Nobody wanted to take them on, despite their sometimes quite considerable value, except against ridiculous down-payments, for fear of exposure. This is when Jacob's organising genius came spectacularly into play.

To begin with he tried his own hand at melting down gold and silver. But he had neither the stall, nor the permit, nor the outlets. His makeshift ingots were left on his hands.

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<sup>5</sup> It does appear that, either out of friendship or out of a sense of humour, Jacob did indeed perform services two or three times for his Netherlands correspondent, but only in cases of sordid murders which he abhorred, no matter the victim. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain details of these affairs.

Then the need to have his tools repaired and to acquire new ones brought him into contact with a locksmith in the rue de Charenton; a passable craftsman, a little given to overindulgence in alcohol and very much an anarchist, his name was Siméon Charles. Aged 40, Charles had an ailing father, a bedridden mother, a wife and two children. He himself suffered from varicose veins in his right leg. Under the pen-name 'Dick', he had written for the short-lived *Cri de la Révolte* and been more or less compromised when comrades Choup and Bernard had been arrested in Nancy the previous year. In return for a salary which could vary between 150 and 300 francs, depending on the scale of the job, he agreed to manufacture pliers and jemmies according to minute plans supplied by Alexandre.

Despite an exaggerated fondness for red wine that set his hand a trembling and sometimes obliged him to take his order for especially precision items to Tardif's in the impasse du Pressoir, Charles was a good sort. He introduced Alexandre to Emile Limonnier, a business employee aged about 50, who lived near the Montparnasse railway station, at No 16, rue Lalande. The resourceful Limonnier, an anarchist of course, knew the business world.

'My name is Escande,' Alexandre told him. 'I'm an antique dealer. In the course of trips around the provinces it sometimes happens that I turn up old jewel mountings of no value saving their gold content. Would you know the whereabouts of a small precious metal smelter's that might take these trifles off my hands?'

Whereupon Limonnier drew him into the backroom of a little cafe in the Temple district, in the rue Michel-le-Comte, Olary's place.

'Your proposition interests me,' Olary said. 'I'd be glad to act as go-between.'

'I want no middleman,' Alexandre replied.

'In that case, no smelter's.'

'I want to see the smelter,' Alexandre insisted, drawing a wad of notes from his pocket. Ten minutes later, the cafe-keeper brought before the antique dealer Esconds a young man by the name of Apport.

'I'm sorry,' the latter began, 'but you've come too late. I'm only an employee. My boss, who is on the verge of bankruptcy, is loathe to take any further orders. He's selling up.'

'Let's walk a little,' was Alexandre's answer.

They went a few paces down the street.

'I know you,' Alexandre continued immediately. 'I've seen you at a public meeting in the 17th *arrondissement*. You spat on the army. You're an anarchist.'

After an hour Alexandre knew what he needed to know. The smelter's belonged to François Brunus, from the same village as Apport, a native of Amont in the Saône-et-Loire department. Brunus was 36 years old. Following some obscure falling-out, his partners had walked out on him two years before, leaving him saddled with debts and short of customers. Since then he had wallowed in the company of his wife and child. Business had not got any better. Brunus took refuge in resignation, bitterness and absinthe. Apport, who lodged at his house, ate at his table and tried to drum up orders for him, swearing that Brunus was a good sort, inoffensive, discreet, an anarchist at heart, though he refused to acknowledge it. Alexandre persuaded Apport to introduce him then and there.

He overwhelmed Brunus, painted him a glowing picture of the world, indulged in some pally horseplay with him and then, during the family dinner which followed, sealed their bargain with a solid handshake. He paid out to Brunus enough ready cash to pay off his most pressing debts. Moreover he undertook to supply the smelter's with a hundred kilos of gold and silver every

month for conversion into ingots. In return for which, Brunus and he would become partners. They would share profits according to a carefully drafted arrangement.

Thus, the smelter's was kept afloat by this guarantee of regular work. As for Alexandre, aside from at last finding a way around 'the parasitism of the fence,' he was intensely thrilled that the thought of his own ingots, made out of objects recovered by him, would henceforth be bought back by bankers and would thus be doubly stolen goods.

Parallel to the establishment of this infrastructure with its international ramifications, he pressed on tirelessly with his burglaries, at the average rate of two per week—operating in tours during which ten or maybe fifteen houses, chateaux or churches were visited in just a few days. Then he laid off long enough to dispose of the loot and share out the proceeds among various needy newspapers or militants.

The gang quickly expanded until it came to have forty members who always operated as separate 3-man teams, but rallied around Jacob for the planning of forthcoming campaigns, the examination of new techniques and the surrender of their loot. In the busiest period of the three years that they were fully operational, they can be credited with 10 and even 20 burglaries per week. Barely half of the gang are known to us. On the other hand, for legal reasons essentially, we cannot disclose too much as regards the beneficiaries of this veritable *racket* with its revolutionary intent: their descendants are still alive today and, less libertarian than their parents, might consider themselves libelled to find their names mentioned in connection with Jacob's. For the same reason, it would be out of place for us to bring up other misdeeds perpetrated by the *Night Workers* than those formally attributed to them by the police or the courts.. which is to say barely a tenth of the true total which should not fall far short of a thousand.

Every sortie, moreover, did not net a fortune, necessarily. There were disappointments, misfires, reverses. The beginnings were catastrophic.

On 13 February 1901, whilst Ferrand, using the name Dunin, was putting his talents to use in the Soissons area alongside Georges Lombardi, alias Vambelle, a militant, acrobat and pickpocket, Jacob, using the name Feran was, followed by Royère, shinning up a drainpipe at Rouen's Saint-Sever church, smashing a fanlight in the sacristy roof, letting down a rope on to the floor, forcing a connecting door into the sanctuary, scooping up the coins placed in the collection-boxes, and the contents of various cupboards, including a solid gold chalice, and then leaving on the main altar the calling-card of Attila, to which had been added these words, 'Almighty God, seek out the thieves who have stolen from other thieves!'

After some time spent in Paris negotiating the fencing of the chalice, ciboriums, candlesticks, reliquaries, brocade and lace, the pair arrived in Orléans on 24 February. On 27 February, in the rue de Loigny, they burgled a Monsieur Levacher and the widow Benoît and then calmly returned to their hotel room before heading off to check out other 'seals'.

Unfortunately, Monsieur Levacher, returning home barely a few hours after their visit, had tipped off the police. All of the town's hotels and furnished apartments were systematically gone over. At 7.0 pm., just as they were preparing to venture outside again, two gendarmes knocked on their door. Royère grabbed his revolver. Alexandre gestured a warning against that: there might be other policemen downstairs.

'Do as I do,' he murmured.

He opened the door, feigning dozing, willingly presented his phoney papers and agreed with a smile to follow these gentlemen to the station.

'You're quite right to check the identities of travellers,' he told them. 'One never knows whom one is dealing with. No antique dealer is going to prevent you from protecting private property!'

At the foot of the stairs, while the law's representatives swung right, he coolly turned to the left. Royère followed hot on his heels.

The gendarmes called out to them. Alexandre quickened his pace.

'Run for it!' he told Royère. 'I'm going to hold them off for a while.'

Simultaneously, he dived into a darkened porch. The cops made to follow. Two gunshots rang out. Constable Couillant slumped.

*—Hurrah for constable Couillant! He did his duty well!*

*—Oh yes! He deserves a lot from capitalism and from property! That wasn't heroism: it was idiocy!*

*—You should be ashamed to talk like that!*

*—Bakers make bread. Bricklayers build houses. Shoemakers make shoes. The State prosecutor severs heads. Lovely occupation! I have no regrets. If I did what I did, it was because I believed that I had to. If I could begin again, I would. Before I disappear, though, I have to tell you that I despise you and hold you in contempt. You are the masters, but I do not acknowledge your right to sit in judgement of me!*

Alexandre then beat a retreat in the direction of the stairs. He climbed as far as the third floor, opened a landing window which gave on to a winter garden on a lower storey, belonging to another building. Then, without hesitating, he plummeted amid a crash of broken glass, got to his feet unharmed and raced off again.

The first door he came to opened into a dining room: the dining-room of Doctor Buisson, the deputy from Le Loiret who was peaceably at his dinner along with his children, waited on by a couple of servants. Alexandre burst upon the scene clutching his revolver. Everyone froze in amazement. Crime had exploded on to the banal scene of cabbage soup.

'Don't put yourself out on my account,' he said, engagingly. 'I am a poor unfortunate smuggler with the constabulary on my trail. I follow that trade as a means of feeding my family.'

Even as he spoke, he quickly removed his overcoat and bowler hat, hung them on a hat stand, snatched the velvet cap from the head of the deputy, slipped a pen behind his ear, grabbed an apple from the fruit-basket and, without further ado, save to excuse himself for having entered without knocking, sauntered out again.

'It all happened so quickly,' Doctor Buisson was telling the police inspector an hour later, 'that if there had not been 5 of us in the room and if he had not left his overcoat behind, I'd have thought I was dreaming.'

Alexandre slipped his Browning back into his pocket and stepped out on to the street, munching his apple, like some bourgeois startled by the to-do in the middle of his dinner. A crowd was milling around the house next door. Gendarmes were popping up everywhere. Three carloads of firemen were already getting ready for action. Aping everybody else, he gazed in an interested way towards the roof via which 'he' was supposed to have made good his escape.

'They've got one of them anyway!' people were saying, all excitement. 'He was caught running away towards the quai Neuf!'

Step by step he backed away and then, turning on his heels, strode off, making an effort to stop from breaking into a run. He quit Orleans. Followed a railway line. Luck was on his side: a train whistle soon blasted out. It was trundling along quite slowly. Alexandre skulked in the undergrowth until the locomotive had passed, and then hopped on to the buffers between the two goods wagons.

An icy rain began to fall, mingling with the sweat that glued his shirt to his skin. After a few minutes, he was shivering. Huddled up, teeth chattering under gusts of wind, he clung on until the lights of Artenay came into sight. There he let himself slide on to the ballast, shook himself and tried to get his bearings. He was drenched, grease-stained and hatless, which latter fact drew the attention of the curious more than all the rest. He was shaken by trembling from cold and fever. Coughing fits were choking him. So.. according to eyewitnesses, Royère had been captured. Wouldn't he talk if questioned too closely? In which case, Alexandre's description was going to be telegraphed throughout France: the railway stations, roads and tollbooths would be under surveillance...

In the drizzle and impenetrability of the night, he spotted a graveyard. He hopped over the wall. His throat was ablaze with thirst. Grimacing somewhat, he lapped a little cloudy water from a puddle, before tasting some from a basin, not that it tasted any better. It made him feel nauseous.

2.00 am. chimed somewhere. The graves offered no cover. Laboriously he hoisted himself over the wall again, then, on the verge of delirium, tottered towards the open countryside. This was an attack, the likes of which he had not suffered since his return from Dakar. When a haystack loomed ahead, he collapsed on to it, snuggling into it as if into a feather bed and slipped into a sound sleep.

Dawn woke him. The fever seemed to have eased somewhat, but he was in pitiful condition. At least he had recovered his clear head, more or less. He needed to find a place to lie low. Having brushed off the straw clinging to his still damp clothing as best he could he set off in the direction of the town, racked from time to time by fits of shivering which forced him to lean on the trees.

Before reaching the first houses, he rooted around for two flat pebbles which he slipped inside his cheeks so as to change their profile, fashioned himself a stick and slipped a handkerchief up his back to feign a hump. Then, bent double like an old man, he made his way towards the railway station with faltering steps: without the wherewithal, this was the best he could manage by way of a disguise. In a shaky voice, he asked the clerk for a third class ticket to Paris. It would be an hour before the train was due through. That was an endless agony in a waiting-room poorly heated by a stove. Slumped over his stick, he monitored, through half-shut eyes, the slightest movements of the staff and the comings and goings of the travellers, disguising the intensity of his gaze which would inevitably have drawn suspicion to him, numbed with cold, throat parched, out of sorts for want of sleep and ready to sell his life dearly should the gendarmes come on the scene.

When at last the train was announced, he played his role as old down and out so convincingly that one stranger, moved to pity, helped him up the steps of the carriage.

He got off at Palaiseau, bought himself a newspaper and climbed aboard an omnibus. 'The crime of the rue de Loigny' occupied the front page of *Le Matin*. The article mentioned only Royère. No details were provided concerning the 'mysterious accomplice', the elusive Arsène Lupin to be. Who could say, however, if a trap had not been laid at Thériez's place in the rue de la Clef?

He went to Martha's place. Martha, once she had given him some decent clothing, promptly took him to the house of a doctor, an erstwhile member of the jury in the 'Trial of the Thirty' and, since then, a convert to anarchism.

The doctor hid him and tended him like a mother for four days. Through Martha, he was aware of Jacob's activities and realised how important they could be for the Cause. He managed to get word of her lover's circumstances to Rose, who was consumed with anxiety, and passed

on Alexandre's strict injunction that she make no attempt to call on him for the time being: she might be tailed.

On 5 March, hair dyed white, his health almost restored, he showed up at the stage door of the Porte-Saint-Martin theatre. Another of his brainwaves: at a time when every policeman in France was on the lookout for him, he had reckoned that the best way to hide was to be seen in public every evening. The doctor had chanced to mention the rehearsals, then underway, of Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?*, whose director was a sympathiser. And so it came to pass that the Parisian premiere-going smart set was able to applaud, up there alongside Cora Laparcerie and Jean Coquelin, the 'comrade of the pliers' who made them tremble for their gold, playing the modest non-speaking part of second centurion. After the performance, as an additional safety-measure, Alexandre improvised himself a bed in a corner of the stage.

He soon had had enough of it. The spear slipped from his grasp. The foul smelling crowd off the Boulevards, glimpsed during the intervals, exasperated him. He was revolted by the text of the play, a paean to the heroism of the early Christians. He ventured to have a young lad pass a note to Ferrand at Thériez's, saw him and invited him to accompany him on an expedition into Germany: the people at *Le Libertaire* wanted closer contacts with the comrades across the Rhine, mainly to pursue a pacifist campaign and to counter the nationalists on both sides. What is more, it might be a superb opportunity to ventilate over there the ideas which prompted the *Night Workers* and to establish the recovery movement on truly international foundations. Also, the indictment of Royère was underway in Orléans and Alexandre still had no way of knowing whether his mate had talked or not.

We do not know whom Jacob met in Frankfurt, Hamburg and Berlin. Whether his visit had any noticeable influence upon the evolution of German anarchism is unknown. All we know of the trip, through the account which he gave to Alain Sergent, is the anecdote which almost cost two Epinal gendarmes their lives.

Overwork and lack of care had infected his blood. Above all he suffered from a very painful and ill-timed bout of anthrax which struck one night in bed, leaving his sheets soiled.

The hotelier thought that some shady criminal business was afoot and he tipped off the police. Two rozzers knocked on the door of the room occupied by Alexandre and Ferrand just as the pair were having breakfast: immediately they thought that it had something to do with the Orléans business. Even as he handed over his papers made out in the name of Joseph Escande, Alexandre was ready to unholster his revolver.

Once the gendarmes had, a touch wearily, given the honourable antique dealer an explanation for the reason for their call, he burst out laughing and, capitalising upon what would doubtless be an unrepeatable opportunity, he unbuckled his belt and showed them his backside by way of proving that he really had had an attack of anthrax.

He did not return to France until the end of March when he discovered from a letter that the Orléans assizes had handed down its verdict: Royère was sentenced to penal servitude and himself to death, albeit under the name of Feran. Royère hadn't cracked, then.

## II

—*Your confederate, Royère, died in captivity.*

—*What does one victim more or less matter to you, eh? But he was innocent!*

*—If indeed he was, how come you let him be sent down?*

*—Do you take me for a simpleton? Did you want two culprits instead of just one? Royère was no sabre-rattler, nor was he a nark or a snitch! That was why he did not give me away. YOU murdered him!*

This disappearance of his faithful companion was especially irksome to him as he reckoned that it was his fault. Had he not showed up in Mont-Perril, Royère would have stayed there as a male nurse, the only creature with any compassion for the sick—more useful in that role, perhaps, than in the role of a housebreaker to which, for all his willingness, he had never really taken. So the social war had claimed another victim. Alexandre could not get used to the idea of having been the cause of someone else's misfortune, even one person, when he was striving for the improvement of everyone's lot. For his own part, he accepted the risks. But it pained him to have others share them.

Around 5 April, a raid on the home of Monsieur Merlin at 5 rue Nicolas Henriot, Riems, hit some snags. He had to slip in via a small basement window and, using a crowbar, punch a hole in the brick partition separating the basement stairs from the hallway. And rifle the safe on the ground floor—which took two hours. All, it is true, for a somewhat tidy sum of almost 10,000 francs.

On the night of 10–11 April, they had very nearly been caught at the home of Monsieur de la Rivière: Madame Bourg, a neighbour woman, a cook, heard the noise and roused the neighbourhood. Luckily the business was already done and the 15,000 franc haul netted: but they had to get offside sharpish.

*—Monsieur le Président, might it be specified where the plaintiffs were when I made entry into their home?*

*—They were in the country.*

*—Ah? So they have two chateaux? They are hardly unfortunates then! What have they got to gripe about?*

Again in Amiens, on 26 May, the job had not been any easier at the home of Monsieur Chivot, 38 boulevard de Belfort. The multiple locks and the forcing of a particularly uncooperative strong-box ate up a part of the night, preying on the nerves of Alexandre's confederates. He alone remained cool. He was even forced to admit that he was developing a taste for this new calling. Danger was like a drug to him.

*—Jacob, what did you do with the silver flute, worth 600 francs, that was stolen from Monsieur Chivot? No doubt you melted it down?*

*—That would have been a pity. I know the value of things better than that. I gave it away to friend.*

As long as he stuck to theory, the militants had been wholeheartedly on his side. In practice, the daily flirtation with danger, the indispensable technical know-how that took too long or was too hard to come by, began to daunt even the most enthusiastic. They could not all boast the same measure of thoroughness and daring as their guiding light. The more he got carried away, the more numerous the desertions became.



So Alexandre discovered that well-meaning types are not necessarily the most useful in a guerrilla war. This discovery could not but have been heart-rending for an idealist. But there was no getting around it. And so it was, that in order to make good the gaps in his ranks, he was compelled to avail the talents of persons with a chequered history.

The courts were to conclude that these were: ‘...hardened criminals whom it would be difficult to imagine mending their ways.’ The examining magistrates would deem them *déclassé* elements, a judgement against which there was no appeal, a damning excommunication. But where had the term *déclassé* come from, if not from themselves, the very ones who denied the daily reality of the *class* struggle? Like Rose, these *déclassé* elements, the products and outcasts of society, were as far as Alexandre was concerned *a priori* worthy of compassion. Pushed outside the law, honest to themselves, they might become stalwart fighters.

He had no misgivings about availing of their skills. It mattered little that this sort of ex-con had never read Stirner or Bakunin, provided that he was a thoroughgoing rebel and might be of more service to the Cause in a break-in than some clumsy faint-heart of a theoretician: did one have to have a philosophy diploma to become a revolutionary? He insisted upon but one condition before they were accepted: that they never let themselves be shut up inside the closed system of the underworld, the folk who obeyed the laws of the *milieu*, who worshipped but one God, money, and prostrated themselves before one master, brute force. Society pronounced rotten those whom it sought to bring down, the way a dog is accused of being rabid. Jacob, along with the anarchists, always took the dog’s side.

However, hadn’t something in these angels excluded from the social paradise gone bad on the account of their having repeatedly been given to understand that they were ‘fundamentally mischievous’ and their having lived in conditions of squalor? Perhaps. But Alexandre turned the objection around: by dint of profiting from unfair privileges, the best of the bourgeoisie had necessarily been corrupted. By dint of having sampled the slavery of the factory, the most intelligent of the workers (unless he moved up a rung on the ladder, which only cast him in the role of the exploiter’s domestic) automatically became a moron. In short, it was no simple feat—and doubtless never had been—to be at once an individualist and a socialist.

Be that as it may, Péliissard<sup>6</sup>, alias Edme, alias Plessis, alias Royan, was accepted without difficulty into the ranks of the *Night Workers*. His police file was already quite substantial: a month in prison and a 16 franc fine in 1886 for insulting and disorderly conduct—assuredly, in Alexandre’s eyes, as glowing a recommendation as the citation which he had received during his military service in the Tonkin campaign ‘for having risked his life to rescue a wounded man who was about to fall into the hands of the Chinese’; six months the same year for assault and battery—but he was right to defend himself: in 1888, a 50 franc fine for fish poaching—but one has to eat. Another six months for assault and battery in 1888, augmented by a five year residence ban: that was to prove his undoing. Péliissard had very definite opinions about this residence ban. He had written them down. ‘That law on its own had manufactured more convicts than all wicked instincts put together. Its objective was the degradation of the proletariat, with the aim of reducing the number of electors in its ranks. The ban on residence gave rise to the great roundups when, on the pretext of seven or eight different sorts of vagrancy charge, you were thrown into prison. Eight out of every ten arrested were innocent or harmless. This was their first contact with the system, not of

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<sup>6</sup> Born in Lyons on 15 June 1867. Bachelor. In theory he worked as a street-hawker. His mother was in business, as was his brother who had settled in the United States at 312 Aliso Street in Los Angeles.

*correction* but of *corruption*. Some of them could not bring themselves to leave town; thus, a fair number of them have received their thirtieth or fortieth sentence to between one and thirteen months imprisonment, for the ghastly crime of breathing the air of their native land and that in an age where the words Fatherland and Freedom are so loudly extolled. I am equally its victim in that my mother wanted me to join her business in Lyons, where I was not allowed to go. This law made off-limits to me, not only Lyons but about a hundred French towns, so much so that the victim of it has to resort to the most subtle subterfuge in order to escape the repression. This law clears out one town only to infect the remainder, forming cosmopolitan environments... Had I not been prevented from going straight again, I would now be a businessman in Lyons.'

Whatever this speech for the defence may be worth, Alexandre could not have failed to be sensible to it. In it he saw something of what he himself had experienced. The magistrates, on the other hand, had visibly not paid any heed to Pélissard's words: they had sentenced him to another five year prison term, plus a further five year residence banning order at the Rhône assizes on 20 May 1895, for aggravated robbery: and six months, immediately afterwards for the same thing: those six months were as yet not up when Alexandre initiated him 'on the hoof' into his techniques at the home of Monsieur Hulot, a justice of the peace in Le Mans, on the night of 9–10 June 1901. Pélissard, drunk with delight at having, on his trial run, burgled one of these 'big cheeses' who would shuttle him between cell and 'cooler', learned there to use pliers in order to break in a front door, how to use a picklock to open a drawing-room door, and how to use a brace on the safe. The haul was a substantial one: upwards of 156 chains, medals, sweet dishes and very rare, extremely pretty jewels some of which dated from the 15th century and all of which were little marvels—not to mention the silverware, vestments and lace. For his part, Alexandre was sufficiently pleased with the operation to leave his calling-card on the mantelpiece: 'On you, justice of the peace, we declare war.' Pélissard, less polished in the display of his pleasures, made do with urinating into a (previously emptied) bottle of white wine and leaving a magnificent turd on a drawing-room armchair. When, on the street, at around 4.00 am, they crossed the path of Monsieur Camille Bolée, a Le Mans industrialist, Alexandre politely doffed his cap to him.

*—Shortly after the theft, my wife died of a stroke brought on by the annoyance. So they stole my wealth from me and killed my poor wife!*

*—I regret the coincidence, my poor sir. But I am not, when all is said and done God the Father.*

On the night of 8–9 July 1902, Monsieur Verdier, a hosiery manufacturer residing in Saints-Pères, received a visit from them at his Nanteuil-les-Meaux factory. The worst thing was not so much that they entered the plant as that they transported the safe on a mattress from the office to the factory proper, where the noise would be less noticable and then forced it, for the Notan-Schmidt safe required expert handling. From inside 4,555 francs were removed, as well as five share certificates from the *London and Paris Chemistry* company. At around 3.30 am, Gaston Cruel, a butcher, who was going fishing, saw them heading towards the railway station at their ease.

On 1 August it was the turn of Madame Clemot who was holidaying in Sables d'Olonne at the time: They called to her home at 24, avenue de Limoges in Niort.

Then Pélissard stupidly let himself be caught in a roundup in Paris and received a further six month sentence, for the usual infringement of the residence ban.

*—Pélissard, have you anything to say in your own defence?*

*—It is not for me to defend myself. I am a child of Nature, an enemy of men's nature...*

*The laws of nature would make this earth a paradise. Men's laws have made it a hell.*

*I am surprised to be hauled before you for children's games, after what I was taught in the regiment. In Tonkin, I saw French soldiers pounce on harmless natives, and cut their throats in a frenzy after having put the villages in which they had sought refuge to the torch, and that just because they refused to carry our baggage some hundreds of leagues away, far from their homes (...)*

*The bourgeoisie is a lawful association of lawbreakers which prevents others from taking power (...)*

*The press is a pack of baying hounds in the service of the police, tolerating their thieving and frame-ups.*

*The police? The mightiest weapon for making people base and cowardly.*

*Justice? a scale which tips this way or that for the same offence, depending whether one is rich or poor(...)*

*Anarchy is the sublime ideal of the plaintive, and the poetry of fertile minds.*

*That is all I wanted to say.*

A guy from Ardèche stepped into the breach... Marius-Antonin Antoine Baudy, born in Grospierrès on 18 October 1875. He had just been released on the occasion of 14 July 1901 from the Centrale prison in Nîmes. Such was Jacob's fame in those places of ill repute that he promptly made his way to the Hotel de la Clef. There he ran into Clarenson 'the baron' who had likewise just been released from the Centrale. Together with Thériez, the owner, and Bonnefoy, Clarenson's alter ego who had just arrived from Marseilles, they launched into endless games of cards and bowls. The Latin Quarter hideout had become a rendezvous. Alexandre frowned. The atmosphere was starting to deteriorate. He ranted and raved. To no avail. He was called a schoolmaster and sergeant-major.

Baudy quickly made a conquest in Rose's sister, Jeanne, who was referred to as 'la Marseillaise' on account of her accent. They all used to lunch together at a little restaurant at 5 Boulevard Voltaire. Then, whilst Alexandre, who had become something of a kill-joy, was hatching a new job with Ferrand or confabulating with Matha, Sébastien Faure, Pouget, Jean Grave, Pierre Martin or Malato in the back room of the cafe Muniez at the bottom of the rue Lepic, they rattled the dice in the cup. The moment his back was turned, the dreary dosshouse again became another Macao: legionnaires are less manageable than choirboys.

Baudy, this lost child of the *Belle Epoque* was an engaging sort. In prison he had scribbled a few pages of 'Confessions'... 'the song of a lad who went to the bad', an epic of distress, memoirs of 'one defeated by life', as he put it, in which one would have been hard put to it to recognise the 'redoubtable lawbreaker who shrinks from no crime' whom the indictment spoke of. No doubt he was skipping some of the more lurid aspects in passing. But we must let him speak for himself.

'I am a posthumous child: my mother, widowed after a few months of marriage, entrusted me to my grandmother, a tender-hearted, affectionate woman in order to provide for her needs and for mine, and the latter reared me up to the age of eight.

My mother reclaimed me in order to place me with one of her brothers, a married man with a family. His intentions in taking me in were praiseworthy but I displeased my aunt. With the sure instinct of children and animals, I realised that I was unloved. To list all of the humiliations and all of the insults to which I was subjected over a four year period would take too long. These had a considerable influence upon my character. My natural sobriety and shyness, with a tendency towards melancholy, were aggravated by them. I became increasingly morose. My sadness was a permanent feature. I had an unhappy air about me. I liked solitude. To escape my aunt, I used to wander through the woods and fields for whole days. My only friend was a dog which, understanding my isolation, was the only creature to afford me any affection. Often I would awake with a start in the night, sobbing and calling for my grandmother. A poor orphan, I was even then treated as a pariah.

‘At the age of twelve, following an undeserved punishment, I ran away to my mother’s house: she was then a cook in a bourgeois house in the outskirts of Marseille. At first she was surprised. When I showed her the marks of blows she wept. But she could not hold on to me. So she sent me away to another one of her brothers. He was very good to me. It was he who had me educated.

‘At the age of fifteen, he placed me as an apprentice with a master-sculptor. But this uncle, a driver, was scarcely able to spend any time with me or tend to my melancholy. So that I began to read stories, novels above all, which troubled my childish mind. The reading of melodramatic scenes of the people’s wretchedness and misfortunes plunged me into profound reveries.

‘Internecine struggles, the question of pauperism and all the social blights which ravage mankind were so many question marks stimulating my mind to probe their causes. That I found it impossible to discover the solution to so many ills perplexed me. However, in the jumble of my thoughts, it seemed to me that since everything was not working for the best in the world, a future cataclysm was inevitable and that a spirit of renewal, a Christ, a Messiah was going to arise and regenerate humanity through a new and more equitable order. My predisposition to innovative ideas arose from this. It was inevitable that the revolutionary gale blowing over the nations of the old and new worlds sowing in its wake everywhere the seeds of revolt against the old social system, should find suitably fertile soil in me. So I embraced the doctrine of libertarian philosophy. I threw myself body and soul into that life, hoping to discover there the solution to the social problem by which I was so preoccupied. On a regular basis I began to frequent talks and groups dealing with the social question.

‘At the time of the anarchist awakening, when there were violent acts by some desperate persons and laws of repression, I did not escape the notice of the police and I was kept under close surveillance. In my naivete, I thought that freedom of conscience was an established and inviolable right. How wrong I was! The police did not share that belief...

‘At first the house searches began, intruding upon my family affairs, upon my most intimate secrets as well as upon those of my uncle who, moreover, in no way shared my views, while neighbours were questioned about my words and deeds and my person was seized whenever there was a visit by some government personage or potentate, in actual violation of the sacred right of personal liberty. The police, by their behaviour, were the cause of a breach with my uncle and the reason why several employers did not want to know about employing me any longer. Let me pause here. This treatment was ill-calculated to intimidate me. The contrary was the case. On my side I had a conscience unblemished by any act or even thought of malice. Growing within me I could feel an anger with a society that countenanced such abominable abuses of power. It could not go on forever.

'I managed to throw the police off the scent. I found employment with Monsieur Pernod, a master cabinet maker and sculptor in Marseille at 4, rue Haute-Rotonde. I had been there barely three or four months before the bloodhounds tracked me down again. And so further harassment ensued. They engaged in hush-hush overtures to my boss. But they miscalculated: the upright man said, in my presence, 'I don't give a damn about what my workers may think outside of my premises. I am satisfied with him. I'm keeping him on.'

'But the police would not admit defeat.

'I had a small room adjoining the boss's home. A few days after the first call, they came back, ransacking and going over the whole house without finding anything. But their arrival had upset the neighbourhood. My boss, fearing a scandal and above all loss of custom, had to resign himself to letting me go. Was I not entitled to wax indignant at this despicable provocation and to cry out, with Mirabeau: 'Anyone who finds himself denied the work which he needs to survive becomes a natural enemy of mankind and is entitled to wage a private war against society.'

For some days I searched in vain for employment. Moreover, the certain knowledge that the police would find me again robbed me of all courage. I sank into bitter reflections. Ahead of me lay the prospect of shocking destitution, bereft of bread or lodgings. I no longer dared to ask help of my mother who had already bailed me out several times over and who in any case was even then having problems with making ends meet. My last remaining pennies having been spent, I found myself on the streets again. Crazy with annoyance and pain, my head ablaze, my guts tormented by hunger, I wandered aimlessly like a soul in torment. For two days, not a bite to eat, I slept under the stars, dreaming of Pantagruelian feasts, consumed by fever, racked by fatigue, in a pitiful state, unable to take any more. Then I came across a friend who fed me and lent me a bed.

'Which merely postponed the issue. The dilemma in which I found myself was in fact of the police's making: 'Live or die? But how to live? To die of starvation in the street by some milestone like a dog, or to escape this agony by means of a violent but hearty death by my own hand? Live? But wasn't that to infringe the law and didn't the code provide for a crackdown on that?'

'I chose the lesser of the two evils: after a violent struggle with all my scruples, abetted by the instinct of self-preservation *I resorted to theft as a safety measure. Far be it from me to enshrine theft as a principle, for I abhor it, just as I do anything that is at odds with loyalty and openness.* I reckon that every able-bodied person should, according to his strength and talents, make his contribution to society's wealth, and that anyone enjoying that same wealth and who evades his obligations is a usurper. Right imposes duties. But in all logic, can one accuse of theft someone who, bereft of any other option, takes out of need that which he is denied the chance to earn through labour? Not that I expect the presidents of the assize courts to see it that way.'

Alexandre could not have resisted giving his opinion on these last points. But Baudy is a perfect illustration of what was to set the mastermind of the *Night Workers* apart from his entourage. Jacob had gone for robbery as *an avenue to revolution*—a disagreeable avenue, to be sure, to the extent that it would have been preferable to devise something more beneficial to mankind, but it was an avenue that was, for the moment, a necessary one. His colleagues, less high-minded, often saw it as merely a handy way of fending off death by starvation.

But the paradox lies in the fact that Jacob, whose integrity is beyond all question, while accusing Guesde and the Marxists of making it impossible of attaining the goal they all sought—a happy society—because they espoused authoritarian methods—fell, unwittingly into a similar trap: the robbery method forever marked anarchism with a certain stamp—just as propaganda

by the deed had earlier done. Baudy, less of a thinker, was more thoughtful. All in all he posed, unbeknownst to himself, a mighty relevant historical dilemma: every revolution is nothing more than the product of the means employed to bring it about. Revolutions that require recourse to violence thus spawn further violence. Given that, to date, no peaceful improvement has triumphed in universal reconciliation—and given the need of the oppressed to shrug off the yoke of unbearable privileges, a yoke moreover which is increasingly more sensible—the problem stands. Concern for the lot of one's fellows remains a boomerang effect which brings one back to an obsession with one's own liberation.

Not that Baudy's lot was any more to be desired: 'When called up, I left to do my military service which I did with the 19th mountain artillery, then on garrison duty in Nice. That period had not the slightest influence upon my destiny. However, on 18 March, the governor-general of the garrison rewarded me with 60 days in the brig for having attended a meeting that had not even begun, on the strength of a malicious report submitted by some Nice policemen. My captain, once he had conducted his own inquiry, concluded that these gentlemen's report was a considerable embroidery upon the truth. Apart from this, I had no cause to complain of my superiors.

My first sentence was passed on me at the Aix assize court, sitting in final judgement on 10 February 1898. It amounted to three years' imprisonment. It never rains but it pours.

During my prison term, my sidekick fell out with another inmate over a pair of shoes stolen from another poor wretch. My buddy struck him, injuring him quite severely. I had sided with him in the argument. The courts got to hear of it. Proceedings were instituted. To avert my buddy's being given an additional sentence (he was serving a five year term) I claimed full responsibility for the episode. Which led to the same Aix court's passing sentence on me on 30 March 1898 of another year, not to be served concurrently.

I was sent to Nîmes central prison, there to reflect upon life's vicissitudes. Thanks to good behaviour. I was released on 14 July 1901 with a nest-egg of 350 francs, the fruits of my labour. I immediately travelled to Marseilles to see my mother and seek her forgiveness for all the annoyance I had caused her. I had no difficulty in securing it. What is more, she gave me 600 francs which a great-aunt had left me in her will.

I then went to Toulouse, the place of residence of the employer who had issued me a certificate of employment. Upon my arrival I discovered that he had gone bankrupt. As soon as the police got wind of that, I would be back inside again. So I decided to go to ground. I changed my name and went up to Paris.'

It was there, in the rue de la Clef, that Baudy got to know Jacob, Jeanne, with whom he broke it off after two months 'due to incompatibility of mood and character', Ferrand, Clarenson, Bonnefoy and the whole gang. It appears that, initially at any rate, he was more concerned with gambling than with individual repossession.

'I heard talk of systems and gaming methods likely to increase one's stake. The mathematics of it struck me as right, logical and incontrovertible. It remained only to put them to work. I never doubted that I would succeed. Indeed, in my reckoning, I had not reckoned with human nature, with the gambling fever that takes over the player, paralysing all his mental faculties and banishing all determination and caution from him.

I began to frequent the gaming rooms of Monte Carlo and Belgium, as well as the bathing and summer resorts of France.

To begin with, I played with caution and moderation: and won a lot. Then I became more impressionable and lost my taste for other things: my thoughts were forever on the green baize. I no longer thought of anything beyond that. My character too suffered by it. I became more irritable, more taciturn. No longer was it the sweet melancholy of my youth that plunged me into delightful reverie, but a wild and jaundiced maliciousness which ravaged my mind. Over indulgence in tobacco, and spirits and the poisoned air intoxicated<sup>7</sup> by the alternating emotions one feels, overexcited my nervous system and made my brain overheat. By that point I was at fever pitch, losing, wanting to run away. Impossible. Roulette was in my blood. I was in a state of mental prostration which petrified me and pinned me to the spot. My physique too was changing. My mannerisms were assuming all the hallmarks<sup>8</sup> of the stigmata of the passion. My face was assuming a cadaverous hue. A stomach disorder tore at my guts. Truth to tell, I was unhappy. The gambler's life is very miserable and of all obsessions, the obsession with gambling is the most dire. It pulverises all of the resilience of the soul and the heart; it smothers man's finest instincts. Revolted and sickened by a lifestyle too remote from my aspirations, I was weary of living. Sinister thoughts of suicide I mulled over in my head. I no longer had the... energy to kick against this moral collapse. My soul and spirit alike had been extinguished (...). However, I feel that I was not wicked and the beginning of my life had not predestined me to lead such a miserable existence. But for the hateful persecutors who have victimised me, I would have no cause to bemoan my cruel destiny. I have been the plaything of fate.'

All of this was doubtless dramatic. But Alexandre could not saddle himself with a gambler. As soon as he glimpsed Baudy's 'harmful proclivity', he shunned him. To be sure, he could not stop him lodging at the Hotel de la Clef, nor prevent Clarenson from leading him astray, but the work had to go on at all costs, with or without him.

His most dependable aide was still Ferrand, whose affair with Gabrielle Damiens, Thériez's sole lodger at the time of their arrival on the scene, was no hindrance to activity. Quite the contrary: on days when he was weary, he had her take what was netted to Limonnier's or Apport's. Sometimes he even brought her along to help out on their expeditions...

This time the two confederates embarked on a grand tour. On September 1, they burgled a Monsieur Meslay in Laval netting 300 francs' worth of jewels. On the night of 2–3 September, it was the turn of Colonel Louis at 50, boulevard de la Duchesse in Rennes.

*—Jacob, do you admit having stolen his revolver from the witness?*

*—Yes, but I should like the Colonel to tell me what he used the revolver for... was it for curing, or for killing men?*

*—The haul amounted to about a thousand francs.*

*—A trifling sum, no doubt, to this gentleman. But it takes a worker a year to earn that sort of money!*

On the same night, they called at the home of a Captain Buisson, a neighbour of the colonel: and came away with 2500 francs in hard cash. On the 7th, they were in Roubaix at 10 rue de Clermont, at the home of Monsieur Trubert whose gold plated cruet set they scornfully discarded, but whose safe, a splendid 300 kilo Raoul model they overturned and forced open to net 10,000 francs worth

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<sup>7</sup> We have kept to Baudy's style here.

<sup>8</sup> Ditto.

of jewels, two gold watches, another revolver, some very handsome tiepins—some keys which enabled them to slip out quietly through the door.

On 18 September, they were in the Liège home of Monsieur Delgeur, vice-president of the court of first instance, no less. Moreover, to Jacob's annoyance, one Mathieu Souvenay, who had earlier carried out several burglaries, was given a 3 year sentence by the Liège Criminal Court for this robbery, which had not been *his* handiwork: but somebody had to carry the can for the burgling of a court vice-president.

On the 21st, they slipped into the home of Monsieur Vergne at 9 boulevard Gambetta, in Nevers. With knives they slashed three pictures and a tapestry ('works of art are affectation, the pleasure of capitalists') and made off with his savings, plus a snub-nosed revolver. On the 22nd, again in Nevers, Monsieur Gorbon, a school inspector who had left his home in the keeping of Ranvier, an usher from the Prefecture, received a visit from them: they had the good taste not to disturb the mineralogical collection in which he put so much store.

At around 1 am. on the night of 26–27 September, Madame Perrotte, wife of the notary of Saint-Martin-au-Mont, heard an unusual noise. She looked out of the window and saw an individual wearing a broad-brimmed hat in the yard. She roused her husband, who in turn roused the servant. They raced to the safe: despite its 100 kilos it had vanished. A hue and cry was raised. It was discovered in a field 200 metres distant. And intact: the raiders had not had time to probe its secrets.

And then there was what the reporters called 'the stroke of genius of the rue Quincampoix', a world premiere in scientific burglary from which Jules Dassin was, 50 years later, to take the inspiration for his *Rififi* (*chez les hommes*), so daring was the technique. On this occasion, Clarenson and Bonnefoy lent a helping hand.

Clarenson, Roses's erstwhile 'protector', who was then using the name of 'Audierne' and sleeping with a pretty brunette, Antoinette Bernard, the widow Amiglio, one-time girlfriend of Madame Bonnefoy... Clarenson, an inveterate gambler certified mad by 17 doctors, a dark, handsome lad with a pencil moustache, forever dressed elegantly in a sort of ample dolman jacket of black material, with a straight collar, topped by a broad-brimmed floppy hat which gave him something like the air of a musketeer, was hardly a dab hand at this sort of thing: he was more at home before the green baize than wielding pliers. Bonnefoy, on the other hand, proved invaluable.

Bonnefoy... Honoré, Alphonse, Joseph Bonnefoy... alias Fondet, born Paris 10 January 1861, was an authentic swashbuckling hero.

He had all the equipment for it: broad, prominent forehead, highly alert eyes deep-set beneath bushy eyebrows, a strong nose, and drooping moustaches. All in all there was an air of Mephistopheles about him.

After a splendid education in a seminary, he had enlisted with the army. And served in Tonkin, as had Pélessard. There he had been made sergeant, then sergeant-major in the field. He deserted in July 1881, making his way to Australia and thence to England and Geneva. In 1889, availing of an amnesty law, he returned to France. There he became acquainted with a real beauty, a flirtatious and spendthrift Marcelle Deschamps, whom he married. Two children, a nanny and a lady's companion—expenses were beginning to give cause for concern. Misfortunes, too, began: two prison terms, one for deadly threats and the other for defrauding a minor.

Since 1894 he had been on record as a dangerous anarchist. A number of bizarre events followed: in 1894 he was accused of having, during a journey on the Paris-Lyons Mediterranean



railway, murdered a monsieur Bernard for whom he worked as a business clerk. The contention that Bernard had taken his own life proved acceptable, and the charge was dropped.

A few months later, two individuals who were returning from Monte-Carlo in the same carriage as him were found murdered. Coincidence? Again the affair ended in the charges being dropped.

Off he went to conquer the New World, with Marcelle and the brood in tow. In Chicago he turned to horse-trading: without any success. One fine day his partner was found murdered. No charges were brought.

Upon returning to France, he turned to gambling.

'In a few weeks he had blown all his savings, some 30,000 francs,' his mother was to state, aghast.

Marcelle was forced to go out to work. She tried her hand as a music-hall singer and became quite a success under her maiden name. She gladly worked 'overtime' which brought in a lot more ready cash than crooning—and her husband raised no objection to this. Quite the contrary. He met up with Clarenson. He hung around *L'Agitateur* and came across the young and fanatical Jacob, lived in Marseilles from October 1899 to March 1900 at 30, rue du Progrès and then went to seek his fortune in Tunisia only to return to live in the rue Saint-Thomas from 1 July to 17 September 1900, popped up to Paris, came back to live near the Vieux-Port at 11, rue Pisançon from October 1900 to 6 April 1901, frequented the gaming rooms of Monte-Carlo and the illicit roulette halls of Marseilles, broke the bank at Spa, wagered big and won big. And made big losses.

Finally, on 19 July 1901 he arrived at the rue de la Clef with his wife, had Alexandre take him under his wing, swore that he would share the takings and began to look around for a big haul.

At this point another individual, a gentle dreamer, an intellectual theorist of anarchism, who had earlier published three innocently scandalous books, *États d'âme* (States of Soul), *Quand égorgerons-nous enfin?* (When will we at last cut throats?) and *le Pact surtout* (The Pact above all else), wherein he had eulogised housebreaking and the right to take life whenever personal liberty was at stake. His name: Jacques Sautarel, alias Rossignol. He had been born in Spain, in Llado, Catalonia on 5 January 1870.

He too told his life story much later on in *Le Bonnet Catalan*, the socialist paper which was to be managed and written *entirely* by himself between 1924 and 1926. It had even been something of a pampered existence: 'I was born of an unmarried mother, by an unknown father who was magistrate in a county-town in Languedoc. But I only found that out later during an illness of my mother's prior to her death. I am a miracle child. One afternoon, returning from the fields, my mother, overcome by pain, collapsed and eventually dragged herself into a mountain hollow where I was born amid a pool of blood, while a storm raged.

'At school my classmates use to point me out as a bastard. They excluded me from their games. Continually poked fun at me. I had to fight with them day in and day out.

'Later, having become a farm boy, I slept on straw along with the animals and my masters were more upset by the animals' ailments than by mine.

'Reaching manhood as well as can be expected, I went along to the brothel, that deplorable caricature of love.

'The gendarmes came to pick me up for military service 200 leagues away from my native heath. The fatherland is a real swine.'

All of this was condensed in a few words by the courts:

‘Perfect model of the knight of industry. Former army deserter. Habitue of card schools and low dives. Given the opportunity, has no hesitation in chancing his arm.’ Poor Sautarel, who was destined to become an honourable Socialist Party election agent and a member in Perpignan, of the *Saint-Jean des Arts et de la Régularité* lodge attached to the Grand Orient!...

For the moment, back he came from the army. He got married. Had two children. He was said to be ‘...mixed up with the worst sorts of thieves and murderers’: the same reproach might have been made of Darien. His trade? Jeweller.

For some months he had been employed with a Monsieur Bourdin, a jeweller working from his home at 76 rue Quincampoix. This was to be the root of all the trouble. Was it he who brought the business to the gang’s notice? Or was he, instead, the victim of an unfortunate coincidence... his time with Bourdin, the virulent tone of his writings and his anarchist beliefs? Better not to probe too deeply for the answer. He swore that he was not acquainted with Jacob at the time. That’s a possibility. But he had already run across Bonnefoy and Clarenson. That was to be enough for him to wind up alongside them in the dock in the Amiens assizes.

Be that as it may, on 1 October 1901, a Tuesday, Bonnefoy introduced himself as Guillout to the concierge of the rue Quincampoix with a view to renting the fifth-floor apartment situated above M. Bourdin’s place. He handed the concierge the usual 10 francs by way of a ‘God’s farthing.’ The following day, he was due to make advance payment of 277 francs for the quarter.

‘I’m waiting for the wife and kids to join me,’ he said. ‘I’m going to rent some furniture.’

And, to be sure, on the Tuesday, a cart from the Klein furniture store at 41 rue Richer arrived, loaded with chairs, wardrobes and bedding. On the Saturday, after lunch, Jacob, wearing a steel-grey overcoat topped by a bowler hat, called to see ‘Guillout’. They went out together at 6.00 pm, shortly after Monsieur Bourdin. In fact, they followed him as far as the moment when, upon reaching the Saint Lazare railway station, he boarded a commuter train along with his family. The coast was now clear. And would doubtless remain so up until Sunday evening. Part of the night was given over to a minute examination of the place. But it was impossible to try anything at that hour on account of the noise. The next day, on the other hand, Alexandre came back at an early hour, wearing a blue shirt and carrying a tool-box similar to a locksmiths tool-bag. In which the concierge saw nothing out of the ordinary: the new tenant had doubtless a few jobs which needed doing in his apartment. Why would he not have asked his friends to help him out? Clarenson, in a painter’s overalls, joined them an hour later.

Whereupon the work begun. As noiselessly as he could, Alexandre lifted up the blocks from the bedroom’s parquet floor. Then, with a gimlet, he set about drilling a hole in the floor. The trio took turns at this. By 10.00 am, a hole had been made. By stretching out flat on one’s stomach, one could make out the Bourdin’s bed down below. The opening was widened sufficiently to enable an umbrella to slide through. By manipulating rods and strings, Alexandre managed to open the umbrella and to keep it hanging under the floor: so artfully that all of the debris knocked down after that fell noiselessly into the upended umbrella.

By 11.30 am, a rope ladder had been played out. Followed by Clarenson, Alexandre climbed down in to the Bourdin home. By noon, with laughable ease, thanks to a steel wire and a sheet of cigarette paper, the safe was open. At 12.05, Clarenson hugged Alexandre, leaned admiringly over the watchmaker’s work accomplished by his friend and, in his clumsiness, bungled the combination. Everything had to be done all over again. Tampering with the lock was out of the question now: it would have to be cracked open. Murderous thoughts raced through Jacob’s mind.

He had to have all the equipment let down at the end of a rope and, seething, buckled down to the task again. With great difficulty, the safe was tipped onto the bed. Amid a cacophony of creaking and screeching which they were sure must be audible from 100 metres away, the drill was set to work. Luckily, a violent storm erupted. The rain began to teem down.

The hours passed. Bourdin might arrive back at any moment, would he stay in the countryside for dinner or not? He had not had the courtesy to give them any notice of that. Despite the rain, Bonnefoy took up a position on the balcony in order to have an overview of the street.

At 2.50 pm, Alexandre emitted a sort of roar: he had beaten it. The safe had given up the ghost. Adroitly, he removed from it seven kilos of gold, 280 carats of gems, 300 pearls, 8000 francs in coins: which is to say, roughly 130,000 francs. Plus 200,000 francs worth of securities. In all 1.5 million revalued francs—and that, of course, is not to take account of the enormous differences in the real worth between those days and our own.

At 3.10 pm, Clarenson and Jacob were back on the fifth floor. The rope ladder had been pulled up again. The equipment tidied away. Brushing down their clothes, they blithely passed the concierge, baggage in hand, never to return.

Monsieur Bourdin, upon his homecoming that evening, dashed to the police station in the rue des Lombards. The criminal investigation department went over the scene with a fine tooth comb: to no avail. No clues. No leads. No telltale signs. Nobody had heard tell of any break-in where the same modus operandi had been employed. Jacob had just invented scientific housebreaking.

In a preface to the first adventures of Arsène Lupin, Maurice Leblanc was rightly to write: 'In our day, when everything is civilised, the talent and genius of modern lawbreakers appears to have assumed the proportions of grandeur. Who can boast of having escaped criminal enterprises whose extraordinary daring is illustrated by the tale which we are making public?'

Jacob was much more of a 'lawbreaker' than Lupin: some weeks later, Matha came into possession in the rue d'Orsel, quite near to the rue des Martyrs, of the site he had long had his eye on, and where he might set up the editorial and publishing offices of *Le Libertaire*, equipped at last with decent presses—thanks to which presses they were going to be able to peddle mischievous ideas on a grand scale.

It is true that when Maurice Leblanc went on to speak a little later of the 'formidable resources afforded him (i.e. to Lupin) by twenty handfuls of gems lifted from his store of treasure'—he implicitly admits that his hero did not squander his fortune (as ill gotten as Alexandre's gains) by putting the whole lot back into circulation without delay.

However, after such a sensational coup, pulled off in broad daylight right in the heart of Paris, they had to exercise caution. The *Workers*, like a flock of sparrows, scattered throughout France. Bonnefoy, set up with a solid nest egg, and a cheque for 5000 francs, signed by Alexandre, journeyed to Bordeaux.

Alexandre had the bulk of the ingots melted down by Brunus: he personally ferried most of the securities to his London contacts and most of the diamonds he took to Amsterdam. As it had been agreed that they would operate as a cooperative, each of them received his share of the takings. Even Charles, the locksmith-tool repairer, one day found on his bench in La Varenne-Saint-Hilaire, an assortment of pearls inside an envelope along with this message: 'I know that you are not rich. You will still be able to make 150 to 200 francs out of this for yourself.'

Some of the gems would be rediscovered a long time afterwards on the premises of a Monsieur Henry Duthil, jeweller, at 5 rue d'Odessa. The route they had followed is revealing as to Jacob's methods: Duthil had come by them on 13 May 1903 from one Monsieur Feldmann, based at 49

avenue Sainte-Marie in Saint-Mandé, who bought and sold jewels obtained from pawnshops. Feldman had redeemed them after a Monsieur Lévy, of 5 avenue Gambetta, Saint Mandé had sold him two important batches of IOUs—among which they were included. But that was not all: Lévy had obtained the batch of IOUs from Joseph Donnadio a former jeweller of 70 avenue de Saint-Ouen, who had gone bankrupt and faced charges of abusing his trust—and Donnadio in turn had had them from another Lévy. After months of investigation, the police were to be forced to call a halt there—without ever having been able to find the man who, it seems, lay at the centre of this muddle, a vague, elusive, mythical Picart—most likely an avatar of Jacob, or rather of Monsieur Escande, antique dealer.

Having set all these wheels in motion, Alexandre hastened to rejoin Bonnefoy in Bordeaux—where Rose joined him in January 1902. There she opened up a second account with the Credit Lyonnais. As well as a third account containing 10,000 francs, in passing, in Paris some weeks later. Bonnefoy took it into his head to drop out of things in order to open a varnish business. Alexandre, on the other hand, had no intention of retiring. His mission was not yet completed: since the revolution was not yet imminent. There were arguments. Quarrels. Off he went to Toulouse, where he took lodgings at 8, rue Breteille under the name of Bonnet—along with Rose, of course: he popped up to Paris long enough to trade a further 22,000 francs' worth of securities and maybe to pay a little court to Antoinette Bernard, the widow Amiglio, the girlfriend of Clarenson who greeted his train. Then, more seriously, he had Marie sell up her grocery shop in Marseille where no customer had set foot since Inspector Fabre's searches, hot on the heels of which came Joseph's first attacks of delirium. Even though it meant financing his mother, he preferred to have her at his side because she was 'very good', 'extremely good' and 'very sweet'.

He had an urge to step back and reflect. He was disappointed. The excursions had brought in as much as he had expected, and without too many snags. But he was not happy with the way the gang was developing. Sure, he was not working alongside lambs. However, this low-life atmosphere, these shady folk who gravitated around the rue de la Clef, the selfishness of each of them which obliged him to hammer his fist on the table in order to effect his collections, their increasingly insolent sneers in the face of his militancy which they dubbed 'sucker-ism', their flippancy, their drinking bouts, their greed... that was much more than he could bear. He had confessed this progressive degradation to Malato, who had nodded his head in a puzzled fashion: in his view the idea was still a fine one. He trusted Alexandre to overcome any difficulties. Meanwhile, it was no longer a conspiracy: it was a smash and grab operation.

In the wake of the rue Quincampoix job, there was an all too beautiful chance to break with them, temporarily at least. Let them shift for themselves: they would soon see what would come of it. They would see if they could manage without him. So he opened up a new grocery for Marie in the name of Berthou, in the town of Toulouse where the Jacob tribe could pass unnoticed, at 3 rue aux Changes. Joseph was not keeping well. He was prey to premature senility. Quivering and blotchy, he hiccupped his last days away. From time to time murmurs of protestation still escaped from his gullet, but he was so awash with alcohol that one glass of wine was enough to addle his wits.

Clarenson the Crazy had made a beeline for Monaco. Within a few days he had frittered away his cut. An appeal to Bonnefoy's better nature brought a letter containing a cheque for 300 francs addressed to poste restante, Monte Carlo. Poor Clarenson! As soon as he tried to cash this 3% bond in January he was clapped in jail. To no avail he protested that his name was Puits and that a casual friend by the name of Cabrier had sent him the money to try out a new formula

and that he had absolutely no idea as to the provenance of the bond. He was to be removed promptly to Paris and it took no less than 6 months of investigation before he was informed that no charges would be preferred, on 27 July. Marie, ever sensible to the misfortunes of her son's friends, regularly sent money to him in La Santé during his time inside.

Baudy, the unlucky, romantic gambler, had likewise scarpered—leaving Jeanne weeping and penniless behind him. He had made it to Marseilles. Thence to Nîmes where he had fallen in love with Henry, an anarchist from Montmartre who came by 40,000 francs by using chloroform on a slightly too old lady of private means. That was precisely the sort of thing with which Alexandre wanted no truck at any price. When he found out about it, later, he was to insist that all connections with Henry be severed forthwith. He would not work with him, ever. To kill an old woman just to make off with her pile was to descend to the levels of rottenness that they were fighting against. It brought dishonour on the Cause. That certain unscrupulous individuals should dignify their acts by references to anarchism was something that he was scarcely in a position to prevent: but at least he wanted no truck with them.

Only Ferrand, who had not quit Paris, soldiered doggedly on with the business of repossession. During the ten months which Alexandre was to spend brooding, Ferrand became the makeshift leader of the gang. However, although he had been a fine student of his teacher's techniques and sales outlets, he did not display the same flair in the selection of targets. He set his sights too low.

In Soissons, on the night of 15–16 October 1901, he raided the house of Commandant Baland, who was on garrison duty in Dijon at the time: and netted barely a handful of silver teaspoons to be passed on to Brunus for smelting. On 30 October, it was the turn of the widow Roché in Corbeil: the most important piece in the haul consisted of a Bernard-make hunting rifle which was fenced by Deschamps, an anarchist upholsterer from Champigny who was a friend of the locksmith Charles—and a pair of binoculars. Then it was off to Gassicourt on the Rosny road to burgle Monsieur Shroder, a business agent in Paris. An enthralled Gabrielle Damiens was along on that job. It yielded almost nothing.

During a quick trip to Paris towards the end of November to look over the accounts of 'his' foundry, Alexandre was compelled to point out to him that... 'all this is chicken-feed'. Raids on business agents and widows wasn't worthy of them. It even appears that, in his exasperation at seeing the whole purpose of his undertaking so distorted, he was so carried away as to shower Ferrand with abuse.

'All right then, since you're such a dab hand show us the way,' was the defiant retort from Ferrand.

So it was that on about 23 November Alexandre and Ferrand, with Touzet (a novice who Ferrand had taken in hand) in tow, slipped into a Monsieur Guenard's house at 12 rue Laurendeau in Amiens. Whenever, upon emerging from the cellar through which they had had to gain access, they lighted their Eddison lamps, they were frozen where they stood by the most unexpected spectacle. Touzet's teeth set to chattering. Ferrand scratched his head nervously. They had intruded upon a forbidden dreamland. They were in the Sleeping Beauty's castle. A haunted abode. Exquisite cobwebs snapped the gaps between furniture of a bygone age. Mauve-coloured mildew ran along the skirting-boards, punctuated by grime and rats' excrement. Thick layers of dust covered the furniture. No one had passed this way for years. A vague notion that they disturbed the resident ghost and that their unwelcome intrusion was going to provoke some supernatural cataclysm paralysed them.

'Do we scarper?,' Ferrand murmured.

The three words echoed in the oppressive stillness but drew no answer from any spectre. Alexandre drew a handkerchief from his pocket and set about beating a path through the light and shadows and reflections. He rubbed a commode. His everyday actions imposed a human orderliness upon the eeriness. They grew bolder.

Only to stumble upon El Dorado. Sideboards were strewn with stacks of gold coins bearing the effigy of Louis XIV. Beyond these were heaps of napoleons. A gold brooch set with diamonds lay on a night table. Wads of hundred-franc notes issued under Louis XVIII lay in a vase. Heaps of gold. How to put a price on these treasures of a bygone age? 50,000 francs, no question, and maybe a lot more.

In the drawing-room, lurking behind a painting, was the safe. Ferrand wanted to get away. Without a word, Alexandre drew his tools from his 'violin-case' and set to work. It was well worth the effort. An hour later, they withdrew whole handfuls of securities from inside. At least 100,000 francs' worth, not counting the ones it would be hard to fence. Yet another fortune had fallen into their lap from heaven—or rather, from Purgatory.

Aboard the morning train for Paris, their thoughts were of this weird Monsieur Guénard who was so careless of his wealth. Perhaps he had more wealth than he knew what to do with. Maybe he had had a 'disappointed love affair', as it seems one can indulge oneself in whenever one can afford it. Be that as it may, Alexandre would have liked to make his acquaintance. But that was undeniably a delicate matter.

He was modest in his triumph but put up with Ferrand's chiding: hadn't they wanted proof of his know-how? Well, he had supplied it. For the moment, he would not be coming back until such time as they all, such as they were, would have realised that housebreaking was neither a sport nor a passport to the easy life—but a technique for laying the groundwork for insurrection.

As for the money, he discovered an immediate use for that: since Matha had bills outstanding, and since several comrades repatriated from Cayenne were living in frightening poverty, Ferrand had to be content with a 5,000 franc cut. Alexandre himself caught the train back to Toulouse with empty pockets.

Then and there, Ferrand was won over by the correctness of his views. But Gabrielle did not share his enthusiasm: she took Alexandre to task for 'putting on airs'. What right had he to preach morality? She labelled her lover an imbecile: he was bringing home not one *sou* from the gold-mine. In their superstitious panic, they had assuredly not exploited Amiens to exhaustion point. There were doubtless other treasures to be taken from Guénard's place. Even if only the family portraits and gilding on the furniture which Jacob had refused to strip. She wanted to go back again.

Ferrand, a soft-hearted tough, gave in at first. Luckily, while crossing the Place de la Bastille, he bought a copy of *Le Progrès de la Somme*. The front page was given over to their burglary. Then Ferrand too was converted. Alexandre had been right. They were all leading a sordid existence. Their ideals were crumbling. Unless they wanted to wind up as brutish as any bourgeois, and that without the compensating factor of their comfortable lifestyle, they had to recover their lost purity.

On this premise he hastened to purchase a horse and trailer, determined to spend the rest of his days peaceable and free and selling drapery in the markets. A seething Gabrielle had to trot along behind, griping. That whim lasted less than two months. Gabrielle was cold. 'His comfort,' was denied him. He found the hawking of bolts of cloth humiliating. In January, she walked out on her lover in the frosty environs of Château-Chinon, making her way back to her lair in the

rue de la Clef 'where she had her comforts'. In February, a frustrated, bearded, dejected Ferrand rejoined her, having sold off the cart, sunk in the mire on the banks of the Loire, at a knockdown price.

From Jacob there was no news saving, from time to time, a very dry note indicating a house-breaking to be carried out. Rose alone had spent a three-week stay in Paris from 7 December on. She had come to help her sister, whom Baudy's running away had plunged into the same distress that she herself had experienced in the past, before her providential meeting with Alexandre. For a week, she lodged in a furnished apartment at 48 boulevard Magenta with the Mellion couple, along with the illegitimate girl-child which Jeanne had had by another lover 5 years before.

The fact is that Jeanne needed her evenings. She had just become infatuated with a fitter from the Renault plant, a certain Bailly who lived in 39 rue de Solférino, and who was willing to give up everything... wife and two children... for her. Rose was obliged to receive confidences from all concerned. The pair lived amid destitution and candy-pink dreams. It was Zola crossbred with François Coppée. A proletarian Stendhal: she imagined them making a new life together on 200 francs a month, with a babe in arms, a distraught wife and two youngsters on the streets. She did what she could to dissuade them. To no avail. It was easy for her to play the part of the hardheaded one, she who *had a cushy time of it with her swanky anarchist*. But didn't love have an equal right to blossom among the dandelions on waste ground? Rose spent a little time on errands with which Alexandre had entrusted her at the Crédit Lyonnais and at Brunus's place, and most of all, went for long walks with Jeanne and one of her girlfriends, Henriette Joffray. One fine day, 15 December, on a whim, to prove to themselves no doubt that they were no more senseless than their menfolk, the three girls took it into their heads to do a little shoplifting at the *Bon Marché*. They were caught red-handed, pilfering two underslips and a lace veil. The policeman, touched by their tears, and finding them 'cute', agreed to let them off with a caution. Rose packed her bags that very evening, moving to the Hôtel Rivière in the rue Fontaine where she remained until 12 January. If Alexandre was to get the wind of this!...

Learn of it he did, because she couldn't help but make a clean breast of it to him upon her return. She had expected one of his tempestuous rages: he was merely annoyed.

'That's the sort of idiocy that can spoil everything,' he made do with saying in pained tones. 'But you are free to do as you please.'

This misadventure worried him visibly. She thought his anxiety exaggerated.

'If we were to come back and live in Paris instead of vegetating in this hole,' she murmured, 'it would not happen.'

He would not hear any of it. He was bitter. He had rebuilt a life for himself in the Midi. Acting on his own, he was systematically holding the wine-growing bourgeois to ransom. Marie was back with him. He had missed her a lot. While Joseph was asleep, of an evening, he would often escort 'his two ladies' to the *Capitole* to listen to concerts or watch plays. He enjoyed it in the provinces. Moreover his organisation was so thorough that his absence from the capital was no hindrance at all to him in managing his affairs. He just made a little more use of his system of coded correspondence, that was all.

Not until the following 24 July did he make up his mind to pack up and move. On that date a search was made of the home of the 'Bonnet' couple in connection with a region-wide check on identities, a check inspired by the stunning wave of burglaries which had swept the south-West for the past few months. 'Bonnet' had a safe: like everybody else. What of the jewels it contained? Family heirlooms. The punches and drills? From his carpenter's trade which he had more or less

given up, 'Bonnet' had retained a penchant for DIY. And these 5,600 francs in cash? Left with him by a customer who was also a relation, a Madame Berthou, who ran a grocery store as you can verify.

'Very well. We're willing to believe you,' said the detectives, caught wrongfooted. 'We have no grounds for arresting you. But tomorrow morning you will present yourself at the station to complete your statement.'

The honourable Monsieur Bonnet was never seen again in the Haute-Garonne. As for Marie, she had no problem shaking off the police: she had property on her side.

Upon arriving in Paris, Alexandre did not make the mistake of going back to live in the dump in the rue de la Clef. He took a bourgeois apartment at 14 boulevard Ornano, on 15 August 1902 as befitted the respectable antique dealer that he was. For the occasion, Rose became his cousin, Mademoiselle Roux: he had not had the time to cobble a fresh set of phoney papers together for her.

This new lifestyle led to his leading a double life. He made connections in the entertainment world. Thus, Bourdin, the jeweller from the rue Quincampoix, recognised him one evening at the junction of the boulevard Sébastopol and the boulevard Saint-Denis, in the company of Maule, a singer renowned at the *Parisiana* under the stage-name of 'Honoré'. And he made contacts above all in the business world. For instance, he was for a long time immersed in negotiations with a certain Bléchier who wanted to launch an advertising agency and whose dishonesty he found amusing. He was diverted by the thought of dismantling the capitalist machinery thanks to which one could amass an 'honest' fortune by lawfully duping the public. He lured Bléchier, before whom he had dangled hopes of a substantial investment of hard cash, into letting scandalous things slip.

'But what you are suggesting to me is not very proper!' he would then cry, aghast.

At which Bléchier lost his temper.

'Good God! You are an intelligent man, Monsieur Escande!' the wretch whined on. 'You can clearly see that there will be a tenfold return on our investments within two years!...'

'No doubt, but I cannot see the morality of that. You must come up with another idea, my dear Bléchier, which does not make a fool of people.'

The temptation to convert his fraudulently come by bank notes into some respectable and thriving business must have been great. That we have seen already. But no. Incurably a gentleman-burglar, he had entered the service of an idea which he would not budge from.

Ferrand, upon running into him one day in the Vayssade cafe in the rue du Château d'Eau, fell into his arms as if he had stumbled by chance upon a brother carried off in New Guinea.

'We've made some headway since you've been gone!' he burst out delightedly, drawing him aside. 'That last job, you're going to be proud of us. You'll have no reason to reproach us!'

And they did indeed have a number of exploits to their credit.

Sometime between Christmas and New Year's Day, at the home of a Monsieur Rouard in Chartres, they had scaled a wall 2.20 metres high. On the night of 3–4 January at Monsieur Thonnet's home in the boulevard Lamartine in Mans on the corner with the rue Moyenne in a house overlooking the river Sarthe, they had looted a safe containing 2000 franc's worth of gems and silverware. The door had been fitted up with an automatic alarm. They had spotted it just in time and unscrewed it.

On the night of 9–10 January, along with Baudy and Henry they had called successively at Monsieur de Contade's hotel and the residence of Hippolyte Godard at 20 rue du Bel-Air in



Angers. On the 12th, it was the turn of a Monsieur Loudreau in Nantes. On the 13th, of Madame Richoux in La Roche-sur-Yon. And things had almost turned out badly: they had climbed down into the Hotel du Coq Hardi. They had left it at 7.00 pm., allegedly to take their luggage to the railway station before catching the 11.00 pm. train. At 10.30 pm., they checked out the 'seals'... which were intact.

They scaled the perimeter wall, crossed the gardens and forced open a shutter, and one, two doors. And then all of a sudden, there was shouting: a watchman, Eugène Merceron, who had gone inside by another door, had been asleep inside. Five jemmies, one length of flex and one lamp had been abandoned as they took to their heels. Outside, a crowd had gathered. They drew their revolvers.

'But they weren't used, right?' Ferrand ejaculated oh so triumphantly, as he related the story. Alexander could not help smiling.

In short, they had had to abandon their precious satchels, complete with contents, at the station. The police must have got their hands on them. Charles had had to knock up a fresh set of tools.

Then Baudy, who had made a pretty penny out of these various jobs, had again become unstable. He had moved with Touzet into 175, boulevard de la Gare before heading off again for another tour of the casinos.

His place had promptly been taken by François Vaillant, a flower seller from the rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier, a good sort, native of Orléans who had shared the same experiences as the rest of them: activism and inability to find employment. Sharp practices. Robberies<sup>9</sup>. Then there was Noël Blondel, the good-looking Blondel, a little tearaway for whom Ferrand had a soft spot. He was a typesetter and, on occasion, a cinema projectionist. From Lyons. Had done time twice even then. A poor boy. Of alcoholic parents.<sup>10</sup>

At that point, since Alexandre had been kind enough to send Ferrand an address complete with a plan of the layout and all the necessary information, they had had merely to make their way to Coulommiers on 21 January to the home of a Monsieur Ogier de Baulny, at 3 rue Valentin. That was a letdown: a few ancient coins, some silver tokens and lockets.

Then they had improvised and been dogged by ill-fortune. On 11 February, Ferrand had journeyed to Abbeville with a certain Châlus, a southerner, and brothel-keeper in a *maison* on the Côte d'Azur who was married to a one-time thief-prostitute, Anna Calendini, who had risen to become assistant madam (which had always been an ambition of hers)—a journey intended merely, as Châlus put it, 'to stretch one's legs': it was a waste of time. On 8 March in Amiens, he had visited the 67 rue Saint-Fuscien home of a Madame Beaugrand, along with Vambelle alias Lombardi (or vice-versa, for nobody has ever managed to discover his real identity)... a Sicilian-Belgian pickpocket: another waste of time. Gabrielle had accompanied them as far as Longueau: she had gone on from there to Arras.

On 12 March, there was a further incident in Dreux at the 21 rue de la Gare home of Monsieur Binet: Vambelle-Lombardi was in on this one. A neighbour, Madame Dollet had spotted a light at around 11.00 pm. And begun to scream her lungs out. Another neighbour, Grandjean, who was a

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<sup>9</sup> Vaillant was born in Orleans on 24 July 1871. His first conviction for which he was sentenced to a three month suspended sentence, was as early as 1897.

<sup>10</sup> Blondel was born in Lyons on 25 April 1882. On 31 January 1898 he had been convicted in Lyons and then handed back to his parents and then been convicted again on 7 April the same year for 'special vagrancy', which police reports also refer to as 'moral turpitude'.

retired gendarmerie adjutant, had fetched a peashooter and set about sniping at them: they had had to scarper.

Then there were two new addresses supplied by Alexandre, both of them in Rouen: one, 62 rue Saint-Maur, belonged to a rentier, Monsieur Durel, into whose home Ferrand slipped on 4 April, availing of Durel's vacationing in Honfleur: that netted a rather handsome haul of jewels. Maybe 5000 francs. His companions on that one had been Vambelle and Baudy, again ruined by gambling and swearing that he had turned his back on it for good. The second address had been that of monsieur Deuve, a court counsellor. It had been such a delight to burgle this magistrate that Baudy and Vambelle had returned from Paris the following day to pay him a second call. Netting roughly 5000 francs in all. Baudy had, of course, dropped out of sight immediately afterwards, making for Monte Carlo.

Next, some trifling jobs: at Monsieur Ferry's in Abbeville towards the end of April: netting 365 francs. By the way, at this gentleman's home Vambelle and Ferrand had had some worrying moments: two lovers who were canoodling rather heavily in front of the door to the house seemed most reluctant to release one another from the clinch and banned their exit. On 17 May they paid a visit to Madame Aubin, the widow Théron at 52 rue d'Amiens in Beauvais, coming away with a few hundred francs, for all the difficulty they had had in cracking the safe. On 11 June it was Monsieur Meurdesoif in Abbeville in the Bois Faubourg: the safe had defeated them. What is more that idiot Châlus, brothel-keeper and amateur thief had let himself be noticed during the day at the local bordello. He had had rather too much to drink there and tried to get one of the girls, Marie Blond, to join his own string of lovelies.

'All in all' Alexandre summed up once Ferrand had finished his detailed account of recent developments 'aside from the three addresses that I sent you, nothing too startling'.

I've come to check over the books at Brunus's. I've made a quick calculation. You're behind by more than 20,000 francs in what you should have handed over to the organisation.'

Ferrand made to defend himself.

'I'm not asking you for explanations' Alexandre carried on sweetly. 'I'm quite prepared to believe that business has been bad for you all since I went away. It is true that my gains in Toulouse have made up for your losses. But right now, if you still want to follow me, the team is going to have to be tightened up. Any who prefer roulette to revolution need only go their own way. The revolution has no need of them.'

### III

*—During this period, you appear to have targeted the nobility particularly.*

*—Not just during that period. My opinions have never altered. Among the numerous bourgeois fortunes, there are some which may, strictly, be regarded as the legitimate fruits of some commercial or industrial enterprise. The dealer in alcohol grows rich by poisoning whole generations for instance: the arms manufacturer fills his safe with gold by constructing weapons of destruction. The casino owner—that model citizen, eligible to vote and to be elected—accumulates huge sums by devoting himself to the welfare of bourgeois morality: their fortunes are in a sense the product of... work of a sort. But for a 'noble' work is synonymous with degradation. That's how they have always stayed 'nobles'. One need only refer to history to discover that they owe their wealth only to*

*crime, banditry and prostitution. For centuries, the nobility has distinguished itself only in the art of despoiling and slaughtering people. Later, when the absolute monarchy had concentrated power in its own hands, they were transformed into obsequious and supine courtiers. He who best how-towed before his lord would win the privileges. The cut-throats turned into procurers, the banditry gave way to prostitution.*

*Today, three revolutions notwithstanding, this caste has not forsworn its beloved traditions. Some live merrily on revenues which have never been earned, others, doubtless impelled by some atavistic influence, unable any longer to loot and murder for themselves, give the orders in the army of the very same republic that their grandfathers sought to snuff out from Coblenz. Finally, certain of them, greedier for gain than for glory, restored their fortunes by marrying off their progeny to pig-merchants from America!<sup>11</sup>*

*In short, the nobility is like those seductive blooms whose venomous substance kills: it is an obstacle, a danger to society, being the enemy of all humanitarian innovation. Parasites got up in rags nobles live only off the backs of the labouring classes. Thus, I have made myself an instrument of revolt by stripping them of the fruits of their plunder, with bitter regret at not having been able to do more.<sup>12</sup>*

From then on, Alexandre took his little band in hand. He wanted nothing to do with Baudy, Clarenson nor Bonnefoy. Each of them was free to live as he deemed fit. But his co-workers had to be a little more dedicated to the cause if they wanted to make any mark.

Baudy, melancholy and on the losing end as ever, thus carried on with the cycle of his annoying gambling activities. Then it seems, his new girlfriend, Julia Ruffa, managed to get him to step back for a time from the slippery slope down which he was sliding:

‘But for the help of that courageous comrades,’ he writes in his confessions, ‘I would no longer be in this road at this point. Through her affection and tenderness, she managed to raise my battered morale. Through an effort of will, I managed to shake off that dangerous apathy. It was high time.

I promptly contacted a number of business houses. One Toulouse perfume firm and another dealing in oils and soaps took me on as a travelling salesman. Although a novice in business, the present gave me a fair inkling of what the future held in store.’

His efforts were poorly rewarded: Baudy was stupidly to have himself arrested in Toulouse the following 22 September. On that occasion the Haute-Garonne court was to reward him with a 5 year prison term.

Clarenson, freed at the end of July despite his misadventure with the 3% bond went off to pursue his manic-depressive existence as a card-crazy fool in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, in the home of Monsieur Gauthier, at 28a bis avenue de Paris, along with his Antoinette, the widow Amiglio. That lasted until January 1903 when the authorities had second thoughts and threw him into prison again. Only to set him free after two months. Only to lock him up again. and

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<sup>11</sup> A reference, perhaps, to the 1895 marriage of Boni de Castellane, descendant of the Talleyrand-Perigords, Courlandes, Radziwills and Sagans, to Anna Gould, the world’s wealthiest heiress who, however, did not owe her wealth to ‘pigs’, but rather to railroads.

<sup>12</sup> It is here that we can get the measure of the fictionalisation of Jacob, a commoner, as Lupin, the Chevalier d’Andresy on his mother’s side and some of whose alias were nothing less than... the Duc de Charmerace, the Prince Sernine, or Don Luis Perenna.

release him again. As for Bonnefoy, he had begun to follow his lawful spouse again on her tours of the honky-tonks.

So the field was clear. Alexandre availed of the opportunity to surround himself with a better calibre of collaboration, despite a few arguments with Ferrand who was always ready to take on the first one to show up.

First of all, there was Léon Ferré alias François, alias Mercier, alias Lemer cier. Alexandre met him at a meeting in the 15th *arrondissement*. A virtually illiterate lad, but a staunch militant. A child of Narbonne, where he was born on 27 June 1865. An honest, serious-minded, committed, hard-working mosaic tiler. After his military service, in '87, he had worked for a year and a half in Béziers for a Madame Lignan. And then, from April '88 to September '89 for a Monsieur Sautel at 44, rue des Abattoirs in the same town. Then it was off to Barcelona to spend a year working for Orsola-Sola. He returned to Béziers, to work for a Monsieur Planchais at 31 rue des Abattoirs until 17 May 1891 at which point he set off to seek his fortune in Algiers. There he had also found himself a wife, Angèle Bononi, of Italian extraction; she was pretty, sweet, good and a hard-working sort like himself. He had also caught eczema of the hands there, which had obliged them to return to France. In Béziers it was Planchais, Sautel and then Planchais again. Then the big break: Paris, Ivry to be more specific, from 1 August 1896 to April 1897 with the widow Labrouille at 51 rue Nationale. Then on to work for a Monsieur Picot in the impasse Milord off the avenue de Saint-Ouen for two months. And lastly for a Monsieur Verdy at 66 rue d'Alleray.

But laying mosaics did not pay. The highly skilled Ferré felt duped and cheated, 'swindled' to use his own words, by his successive employers. With their two children whom they wanted to bring up decently 'they could not cope'. His Angèle had had to take a concierge's position at 41 rue Labrouste so that they could make ends meet each month. That is how things stood when Alexandre stumbled on him.

It was towards the end of August. Alexandre, along with Ferrand had just relieved the widow Donay at 13 boulevard Victor-Hugo in Meaux, of what they had deemed a pile of surplus money. He bailed Ferré out of his difficulties with a few louis and candidly suggested that Ferré throw in his lot with him. The matter was discussed in the porter's lodge with Angèle. Not only did she give her approval, but she was quite keen on the idea. It was money from America: Monsieur Jacob was all too right ('Call me Marius or let's use the familiar form of address with one another, if you like'); they had had enough. One had to strike back. She opened her lodge to the gang. To avert suspicion, Alexandre was persuaded to lease, under an assumed name, a second-floor apartment which lay unoccupied. They could hold meetings there. It would also serve as a safe-house for comrades down on their luck. Moreover there was no point in being seen together too much. Whenever they wanted to see one another, all they would have to do would be to tap three times on the windowpane while passing and they would meet in Devaine's bar at 49 rue de Vouillé. Devaine was a comrade and never asked questions. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.

And so they did. From then on there was a veritable frenzy of robberies. The machinery tuned by Alexandre was operating at full throttle. Like bees around a hive, teams scarcely took time to drop their loot off at the rue Labrouste, Boulevard Ornano or at Apport's or Limonnier's before swarming out again. There were anything up to 13 groups operating simultaneously. By preference, Alexandre operated alongside Ferrand and Ferré—but this was subject to variation.

Whenever it was Ferré's turn to act as prospector-scout, since he did not know how to write, Angèle devotedly drafted several telegraph messages for him in advance: he had only to select the most apt. His first attempt—a success—took place at the Compiègne home of Madame de Breda

on 29 August. Alexandre, in a playful mood and keen to put the newcomer at his ease spent his time wisecracking. Madame de Breda, a woman of quality, had two safes. They opened them both. As Alexandre commented to them once the job was finished, they had 'done the fatherland proud'. 72 kilos of silver to be passed on to Brunus, plus numerous gems.

The following day, still in Compiègne, they called to the rue Vermenton home of Captain Edon who was away on manoeuvres in the countryside about Lissonne. The haul consisted of: a silver tea service, a pair of epaulettes, some medals, some crystal bottle-stoppers, some seals, 100 Sedo-line shares in 20 certificates and 50 shares in Standard Oil of California which the unfortunate victim was to be unable to recall at the trial in Amiens. On the other hand, he was to admit to having bought them at 1200 francs, which then drew this retort from Alexandre:

'Well then you were robbed, Monsieur! They were worthless, your shares, and I burned them! But those other robbers have assuredly not been arrested! They operate with impunity! Maybe they even wore decorations from the Legion of Honour!...'

For the raid on the home of Monsieur and Madame de la Rivière in the rue aux Pareurs in Abbeville 17 September, Ferrand acted as the scout. This was a very fine coup: 15,000 francs' worth of jewels and silverware. On the other hand, three days later in Caen, at the house of a Monsieur Pougheot at 20 rue Singer, Alexandre, seized by a fever and a fit of coughing, had to give up right in front of the safe because he was incapable of manipulating the tools. He had almost passed out. He had failed away until he was as thin as in the days when he had the fevers from Dakar. His whole life seemed to flash in front of him. His two confederates had to carry him outside, each of them supporting him under one arm. He had overtaxed himself. Despite his precarious health, he sometimes went for three nights on the trot without sleep, taking caffeine. He ate hardly anything these days.

On the night of 26–27 September, though, he had recovered sufficiently to be able to crack Admiral de Pontaumont's safe at 30 rue de l'Alma in Cherbourg. Some kilos of gems and silverware were taken from it. Amounting to at least 50,000 francs' worth: navy life paid well.

The following morning, as he was passing by the admiral's mansion en route to checking out other 'seals', he spotted a young man scrutinising the portcullis before scarpering, with a quite furtive look around him. Intrigued, Alexandre took up a vantage-point on the terrace of an adjacent cafe. Half an hour later, the young man came back with two policemen. Then a company of fusiliers surrounded the house. Finally some firemen arrived: the young man, who was in fact the admiral's son, spotting signs of forcible entry on the closed iron gates had thought that the housebreakers were still inside.

With undiluted glee, Alexandre watched the warning calls as they were issued, and then the fusiliers darting from tree to tree across the grounds, and the final assault: the string arrangement which he had devised and which made it possible to close the doors behind one from outside had decidedly been a superb idea. He regretted more than ever now that he had not been able to patent it.

Mingling with the gawking crowd, he availed of this chance to try to peddle his views: the burglars had been quite right to rob this rich man! It was a disgrace that admirals should live off the fat of the land in such mansions while most Frenchmen languished in hovels! But he did not meet with the expected success. The good people failed to understand what he was getting at. Sure it was better to rob a fat cat like the admiral. But it could just as easily have befallen any one of them. There were more than just big-time thieves, there were also petty tearaways, seedy prowlers, all manner of starvelings, gypsies and all sorts of ragamuffins ready to disembowel a

working man for the ten louis in his pay-pocket. Or rob the grocery store for the contents of its till. How then was one to discriminate between 'good' and 'bad' thieves? One could not get involved in such hairsplitting.

In short, the gawping crowd rejected the idea that Pontaumont's wealth could only have been amassed through their own poverty and thus that impoverishing him was, perhaps, to make them rich.

Such diffidence, however, did not shake Alexandre's convictions: instead, he concluded from it that the thieving had to be stepped up in order to finance more extensive propaganda and thereby enable anarchist ideas to spread better. He stepped up the pace of his repossession raids.

In October, the trio stripped Monsieur Mauduit de Sopicourt, at 66 rue de Talleyrand, Reims, of silverware, gems and rugs. In November, in Amiens, at Monsieur de Witasse's home at the junction of the Boulevard d'Alsace-Lorraine and the rue des Ecoles-Chrétiennes, out of a simple desire to provoke and hatred of wealth, they cut the heads off the heroes of antiquity decorating the upholstery of his armchairs. On 9 November in Meaux, they stole from Madame Leroy's place Geoffroy home, a 50-kilo clock in green bronze which was to be left in a pawnshop, two green bronze candlesticks which Angèle was to send down to her parents in Béziers as a present: 93 serviettes initialled in red cotton, 36 ladies' blouses, some embroidered lace kerchiefs, some purses all studded with pearls, some Valenciennes lace, 18 fine linen tablecloths, some bolts of chiffon curtain material and other trifles. Moreover, Rose and Angèle fell to squabbling over the allocation of the clothing and household linen: each of them aimed to profit by the careful bourgeois lady's losses in order to fill her own bottom drawer. Whereupon Alexandre, Ferrand and Ferré concluded that women, even comrades and militants and the womenfolk of thieves, were still inferior beings among whom the property instinct was still too pronounced.

They rounded off the series the following night with an abortive break-in: at the church of Saint-Jacques in Compiègne. They had no problem getting over a 3 metres high wall to drop down into the yard of the sacristy and then forcing four doors, but they had to concede defeat before the safe. Alexandre was missing a tool. Ferré had misinterpreted a telegram sent him in the name of Mercier: 'Suitable package received, signed Radinot.' Signed 'Radinot' and not 'Georges'. Ferré had brought along the wrong sort of pliers.

Ferré was full of goodwill but was not always up to the mark. He was completely lacking in discernment. Thus Alexandre had no a priori reproach to make of his friend Alcide Ader, a fellow from Mont-de-Marsan who had worked in cargo-handling at the Gare du Nord and gone on to found a libertarian colony in South America. But why introduce into the group a lad who, as soon as the leaves started to rustle, took to his heels as if a platoon of hussars was on his trail with sabres drawn? To be sure, he was a militant of long standing. A devoted friend of the couple, whom Angèle often went to see along with her husband at 114 avenue Michelet and who was, just then in dire straits.<sup>13</sup> But stray dogs had no place in this vanguard of the advance guard which they were founding.

On the other hand, Ferrand in turn was beginning to lose his 'bottle'. Over the matter of the 10% levy, of course. So much risk, so much fatigue and not even a day off!

'Sometimes, I'd rather be working in some factory instead of following you!' he exclaimed one day.

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<sup>13</sup> Alcide Ader was born in the Gers department on 13 April 1859, so he was 42 years old by 1902. He was a swarthy fellow, hair going grey and suffering from rheumatism. He had never been convicted.

Gabrielle encouraged him in this. Dresses, hairdos and tea on the Boulevard des Italiens where she could play the duchess: that was the only part of this repossession business that she had any taste for. The ideal? Bah! Deep-down she had never forgiven Alexandre for not having let her seduce him when he arrived at the rue de la Clef.

'You're a good-looking lad. How come you saddle yourself with an old woman?' she had delicately broached the subject of Rose at the time.

Alexandre had smiled, blanched a little, but smiled for all that: 'Let's be friends, if you like,' he had said. 'Quality cannot be measured by the wrinkle. Anyway, Rose has none, so far as I know. Ferrand is a pal. I fail to understand what you mean.'

There had been no more *tête à tête*s between them since.

So, on the one side there was the unavailing kindness of Ader, and, on the other, Ferrand's pig-headedness: the same old problems, exactly, were cropping up again. Sometimes it made Alexandre think of an ant trying to scramble out of a sandpit, with the grains slipping from beneath his feet as soon as it has advanced one single centimetre. Fortunately, Marie restored his morale with her letters: since he had successfully talked her round, she had become even more rabid than he was. Her peasant commonsense could not comprehend these obscure difficulties. And then there was Rose. Rose and her sunshine smile.

'My dear Ferrand, if you don't hold with it, go it alone. I can do no more for you,' he summed up whenever they argued over the budget.

Out of pride and lest it appear to Gabrielle that he was always giving in, Ferrand felt himself obliged to persist. But it was only a halfhearted parting of the ways. Their confederacy would soon get the better of damaged pride.

Then again, the meeting with Bour at the 'People's chats of the 18th Arrondissement' (*Causeries populaires du XVIIIe*) which the crutch-borne Libertad had set up just that October in a tiny room in the rue du Chevalier-de-la-Barre was like a breathe of fresh air.

Bour, alias Herselin, alias Tellier, a typesetter and Parisien, was 21 years old. He was the illegitimate son of a charlady, Félicie Moulard, who had handed him over at the age of 2 to his grandmother so that she might be near him, in Brumetz in the Aisne department. Bour, a very gentle, docile and well-mannered lad, had been a choirboy in the church. He used to fetch *la Croix* for the *lady* of the town, the Vicomtesse de Melun, who made a tremendous impression on him. He would very often run errands for her. By way of a reward, she used to tweak his cheek. His grandmother already dreamed of a splendid future for him as *majordomo* at the *château*, or maybe as gamekeeper.

'That lady was educated, you understand,' he naively apologised when he confessed to Alexandre one evening at Munier's after a lecture on 'learning and its use at the hands of the bourgeoisie' which had ended in a horrifying brawl. 'And then there was her grooming, her way of speaking... It wasn't like it was at home...'

'For a start, use the familiar form of address with me,' Alexandre replied. 'Then, admit you were enamoured of her. And thirdly, tell me what she had, this vicomtesse which others did not.'

Bour could only attempt to describe the boudoir where she had received him, the respectful way the parish priest spoke of her, the vocabulary she herself used, the hand which she extended for him to kiss: everything which made him feel a coarse creature, clumsy and oafish in her presence.

'And you let yourself be taken in by this playacting.'

'I was eight years old.'

Later he had sat his certificate of education. By then his grandmother had passed away. He had gone back to live with his mother. Become an apprentice typesetter—just as Alexandre had—with the Didelot couple. His mother had wed a bricklayer by the name of Bour, who had given him his name. But the stepfather and stepson had not hit it off. The lad had fallen in love with a café waitress, Léontine Tissandier, a girl from Marcillac in the Aveyron, an attractive twenty year old. She had soon lost her job and he had not enough money to pay for a hotel room for them.

‘Did she go on the streets?’

‘Well... I don’t really know... she had some money... We could get by, eh?...’

‘And now how do you stand with her?’

‘I’d like us to get married. But I haven’t won the lottery. And then I’ve got to do my military service and who knows by the time I get back...’

‘You’re serious? You’re going off to play the idiot in the army?’

‘She’s in hospital, you realise. I can’t do anything more.’

‘Pregnant, I’ll be bound?’

The following day Rose, loaded down with parcels, called on Léontine who preferred to go under the name of Alice Vincent in the rue de l’Estrapade. Rose had been aware of this. She had not forgotten what it was like just because she travelled in a carriage these days. Into the poor girl’s hand, she pressed a substantial banknote. Out of her own savings. She in her turn had been moved to tears by this tender and silly tale of two youngsters who loved one another, like some romance from the pen of Montépin, and who had been reduced to that.

When Léontine-Alice told Bour about the apples, cakes, money, flowers that Rose had brought her, he was choked. Literally. His breath was taken from him. This was a different world where ideas turned quite naturally into acts, without fanfare, without boasting, asking nothing in return. He had gone along to meetings out of a rebelliousness. But was rebellion also unselfishness then? For a week he searched Paris high and low for Alexandre. Eventually he tracked him down. To announce to him his decision that he would desert the army. And his desire to join the ranks of these *Night Workers* which he had been told about under the seal of confidentiality.

‘I’m all for that,’ Alexandre replied. ‘But first of all you have some vengeance to wreak, comrade. Would it not amuse you to drop in and see what your Vicomtesse is like in her private moments? Only after that will you be able to make up your mind on the basis of knowledge of the facts.’

The idea tickled Bour’s fancy. On the night of 22–23 November, he, Alexandre and Ferré, backed up by Ader who, as was his wont, slipped away just as they were forcing the door and slipping into the church in Brumetz. Inside the erstwhile choirboy was able to exorcise his childish fears.

*—And then... monsieur le sacristain... What did they steal from you?*

*—Vestments, ciboriums... They opened the safe... They made off with the modest church fund, the offerings of our faithful...*

*—Come now, sacristan! Think back! You’re not telling everything! You come down here to accuse us in the name of your God and your morality. But what about the cupboard containing etchings... and etchings of, shall we say, a certain sort, Fragonard... do I have to tell about them myself?*

From there they headed for the Vicomtesse’s place. They swiped everything. Went through it with a fine-tooth comb. Paintings, nightdresses and lace-work. Bour was the most zealous of all.



He was settling old scores. Alexandre smiled at the sight of him emptying drawers, expressing surprise, getting carried away, swearing, ransacking, destroying, stealing.

*—A lace kerchief, handed down from my great grandmother and worth at least 250 francs alone.*

*—Condemned of your own mouth! Isn't that of itself an insult to the labouring classes?*

'I'm one of you, right?' Bour said, beseechingly as they emerged from this double success.

Henceforth he was one of the boys. His activity never let up after that.

On the night of 26–27 November, the oak doors of the church of Saint Etienne in Beauvais resisted. They had had to lift the stones for a diameter of one metre around the opening. Thereafter it was child's play to break through the panels and double door to the tabernacle on the side altar to the Virgin where a ciborium in gilded silver was stored away. Ader, having quaked in the shade of the plane trees and seeing that everything was proceeding well, was dead keen on Attila's leaving his greetings on a glossy white card of double thickness, with the message: 'Almighty God, What have you done with your chalice?'

*—I am chaplain at the church of Saint-Côme in Chalon-sur-Saône. These bandits—these wretches—rifled that holy place on the night of 5–6 December...They hadn't even bothered to close a trap-door in the presbytery. I fell into it at dawn. I thought I had fallen into Hell!...*

That very night, Ferrand, joined by Pélissard who had been freed after his fourth prison-term for breaching the residence ban, put his talents to work at the home of the Noché couple, at 7 rue Campoberg in Rouen.

On 18 December, Alexandre, Bour and Ferré were in Cherbourg, at the residence of Rear-Admiral Aubry de la Noé—whose paintings could not fail to enhance the collection of an antique-dealer as reputable as Monsieur Escande. On 19 December, it was the turn of Adam, comptroller-general of the Navy, whose home had been checked out at the time of the raid on Admiral de Pontaumont's place three months previously. On 20 December, it was the church of Saint-Godard in Rouen. On the 23rd, that of Saint-Jacques in Abbeville.

On the 24th, Christmas Eve, it was the turn of Commandant Vigogne's Evreux home while he was away at Versailles on a course.

It was while this circuit was in progress that news reached Alexandre of his father's having been overtaken by death at the end of protracted suffering. It came as no surprise. Not taking the time even to change his shirt, he jumped the first available train for Toulouse: Rose had to accompany him. A distraught Marie, exhausted by too many long nights of vigil—and at the same time relieved by an outcome which she had expected—fell weeping into their arms. His dying moments had been especially affecting. He was in agony. Screaming that a crab was gnawing at his liver.

Rose managed to find the right words. She loved Marie like a sister scarcely any older than herself. They both worshipped Alexandre. They determined never to be parted again. Alexandre was unable to get out of some urgent 'appointments'—but Rose stayed down there to help Mama Jacob parcel up her belongings. Meanwhile, in Paris, Alexandre gave up the lease in the boulevard Ornano, told the landlord that he was moving to Asnières and rented a new apartment, somewhat

bigger, at 14 boulevard Magenta. From which, however, he moved after a few weeks to set up house at 82, rue Leibnitz after the concierge at the boulevard Magenta took to snooping. The ‘Jacob women’, as court president Wehekind was to dub them, were to follow him there—and then Bour with his Léontine alias Alice, allegedly because they did not know where to take a tenancy, but in fact because Alexandre had, as far as the trainee housebreaker was concerned, become the father he had never known, and because Marie and Rose managed to fill the home with that warm family atmosphere which he had never known. As for Alice, it would be going too far to say that she was happy with this arrangement. A number of set-to’s took place in the kitchen over saucepans which she had left dirty. Other squabbles followed, over lingerie left ‘lying around’ in the toilet. The Jacob women were domestic types. She was not. One day, things came to a head. Alice called on Bour to choose between her and them. The die was cast. Nobody helped the poor girl to do her packing.

Off she went, dejected. Alexandre, learning of what had happened when he came back from a lecture, managed to track her down. He even found work for her in a bar run by some friends. But the breach was final. She no longer wanted to cohabit with ‘those shrews’. For his part, Bour was attached to Alexandre like dog to master: exit Alice. Their separation was to have grave consequences.

*—Alice Vincent, speak without fear. Your candour at the preliminary hearing has served the cause of justice and truth. You personally were present at the sharing of the spoils, isn’t that so?*

*—Yes.. eventually, trunks full to the top were arriving at the rue Leibnitz. And then Bour, Jacob, Marie Jacob, Rose Roux and Ferrand put their heads together, and Ferré as well, I believe. They were talking about their robberies, that’s for sure. Bour even told me how, in Brumetz...*

*—When I think how I picked that girl up out of the gutter, when she had neither a roof over her head nor a penny to her name! So much for do-gooding!*

*—Rose Roux, hold your tongue! And, what is more, you were a participant in these confabs! You were your lover’s accomplice!*

*—I shared his life. He did what he wanted to. I just obeyed him.*

*—You obeyed him! Well now. That submissiveness seems all the odder when you are at least 15 years his senior!*

*—Monsieur le Président! I have the right, I believe to choose whomsoever I like as my companion. I don’t poke my nose into whom you sleep with! The morals of magistrates are well known! You do not take wives older than yourselves! You prefer young girls, adolescents in your homes, don’t you?*

Not that there was any interruption in their work. On the night of 1–2 January, it was the Adam household at 4 rue Saint-Rémy in Soissons: the haul consisted of some clothing and a hunting rifle. A few hours later, also in Soissons, it was the Bahin home in the rue Gambetta: 500 francs’ worth of silver ware, 25 Panama bonds, 2 shares from the Bourse Agricole de Soissons, one from the Société de Paille et de Fourrage del’Aisne (Aisne Straw and Forage Company), all lifted from a ‘cupboard’ type safe of Petitjean make—plus a pot of jam which they wolfed down on the spot.

For his part, Ferrand teamed up with Vaillant, the flower seller from the rue Geoffroy l'Asnier, with whom he was then living along with Gabrielle. To their credit they had: a raid on Monsieur de Boismarin's 44 rue Moyenne home in Bourges, on the night of 5–6 January which netted a fine assortment of gems, including a gold ring set with diamonds, and some cloth: a raid on the home of Monsieur de Beaurepaire, Boismarin's brother-in-law and neighbour on the same night, netting still more gems. Plus some silverware—taken by Gabrielle, it seems, to that gentle intellectual Sautarel who allegedly gave her 225 francs in exchange. Sautarel had in fact succeeded, albeit very temporarily, in opening a jewellery store at 92 boulevard Beaumarchais.<sup>14</sup> The police still want to know the origin of the 25,000 gold francs which he doled out to various smelters during this time for conversion into ingots. Sautarel was never able to explain this. The truth is that he was a poet above all else.

On 6 January, Ferrand and his acolyte ('What's that word mean?—Your comrade, if you prefer.—Ah! Fine! I prefer that!') travelled to Saint-Quentin to pay a call on a Monsieur Noë who had a sturdy safe made by the firm of Bauche of Reims, a safe that was emptied of its contents. On 16 January they burgled a Madame Grand in the boulevard Gambetta in Chauny. Blondel, Ferrand's handsome young protege joined them in Chauny. There they had lunch and dinner and played cards almost all day at the Vandenberg restaurant.

It was on this outing that their run of exploits was to end. On 23 January, traced following a double housebreaking carried out in Nevers, Ferrand and Vaillant were arrested in their rue Geoffroy l'Asnier apartment. Blondel who at the time struck the police as too girlish to have played any part other than that of nancy-boy, was let go. Only in May 1904 would his turn to go inside come around.

How had they come to be caught? Had some gifted sleuth managed to track them down to their hideout? Sautarel immediately offered a different hypothesis on the matter:

'It is a woman who has given Ferrand away', he told Gabrielle whom he ran across in the rue Réamur a few days after their capture.

How naive of Sautarel to have felt the urge to voice his suspicions to Gabrielle. Gabrielle, the only woman in Ferrand's life... Gabrielle, jealous of the affections, to say the least, which her lover cherished for Blondel. Gabrielle the informer! By the time that Sautarel came to realise how ingenuous he had been, too much water had passed under the bridge. It was to be too late to warn the others.

Royère had just died. Clarenson was caught up in the due process of law over his 3% bonds. Baudy, cornered, failed to supply convincing proof of innocence to the jurors in the Haute-Garonne: 'Gambling had not made me a rich man. Though not on my uppers when I turned to business, I was not well enough off not to be waiting upon the monthly return from my commission, which was in any case very slight to begin with. Then I crossed paths with one of my former fellow inmates. He was in the company of three others. With them they had a house breaking kit. Fearful of some indiscretion by the bellboys and owners of their hotel, they were reluctant to leave it in their room—and gave it to me to mind. I was thoughtless enough to agree to it, and, as I was none too 'well off', I was also dumb enough to accept some money and small items taken in robberies, thereby making myself an accomplice, a willing accomplice. I was ar-

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<sup>14</sup> He was to shut up shop on 15 January and thereafter settle with his wife and children in Vincennes to where the police eventually tracked him down.\*\*\*notes not checked.

rested on a tip-off. The whole paraphernalia was discovered at my place (...). All this may seem unlikely...' Indeed it did.

However, none of them had disclosed the existence of the organisation. Ferrand and Vaillant adopted the same line. Thus everything was able to proceed as before.

On 23 January, in Poitiers, Jacob, Ferré and Bour made off with gems, finery, furs, clothing and medals belonging to a Monsieur Boyer. On the 24th, in Cambrai, they made off with Monsieur Boudoux's silverware and jewellery. In Niort, on the 26th, it was the furs and dresses of Mademoiselle des Roches: on the 27th, also in Niort, the silverware and jewellery of Monsieur de Neuchaise. In Compiègne on the night of 10–11 February, at the rue du Moulin, Madame de Frezal's two safes brought them 72 kilos of gold and silver—not to mention some superb jewellery ('If the witness had had tinplate tableware, I wouldn't have taken a thing from her'). Three days later, Bour, having gone back to Compiègne in an effort to round off their work and noticing that the theft had been discovered, hastened to send off a message to Alexandre, signed Henri: the alarm signal.

They got their own back in Alençon at the home of the Duchazé family at 21 boulevard Lenoir. At Horace Sebastiani's Beauvais home they made do with downing some fine wines: the owner was not so rich that they could fleece him. Instead Alexandre was much taken with his collection of stamps, which he let him keep.

At Madame du Postel's Evreux home at Place du Parvis-Notre-Dame, on 21 February, after seizing several valuable items and various family mementoes, Bour set one room ablaze. The fire spread without encouragement. But at the Amiens trial, Alexandre was to have to claim credit for this novel 'crime':

'An accident of war. I do not hold with arson. But if I put Madame du Postel's property to the torch, it was because she owned one. And then again... Do the members of the jury curse the memory of those who set the Palatinate ablaze? Every day, armies burn, not one house, but whole towns. Such reprisals are applauded. And yet I am taken to task because I am an anarchist, because I am not the juror's paid henchman, whilst they prostrate themselves before brass hats! I would show you no mercy. You may do the same for me. Violence is eternal. It will vanish only when the reign of justice begins!'

Alexandre did not question the usefulness of what he did. On the other hand the lingering debates in Parisian anarchist circles appalled him. Faure sulked. Jean Grave imagined that he was above it all and intervened in none of the contests. Libertad and Paraf-Javal, each from his own corner, belched against the whole universe. For all the constant money contributions he was making to them all and above all to *Le Libéraire*, newspaper sales were not increasing. A thousand times as much money would have been needed. A hundred times as many professional recovery-men—provided of course that they all regarded thieving as the business of a militant. The propaganda remained ineffective. Internecine squabbling, parish rivalries and theoretical quibbles gobbled up about two thirds of the energies available, without anyone's bothering, seemingly, with effectiveness. It was enough to drive one crazy. Better not to think about it. Meanwhile, those *others*, the syndicalists were making headway: the Montpellier congress had just set the seal on union between the *Bourses du Travail* and the CGT, at whose head Victor Griffuelhes had replaced Pelloutier. To be sure there were anarchists among them also. But where was the place of the individual mind in the mass actions which they espoused?

Alexandre came away from every reunion, every meeting, every lecture more depressed than before. And he was not alone in that. Malato, too, was suffering. And Martha. And Louise. And

many others. But, for all their striving, none of them was able to prevent the divisions from worsening. One would have said it was a crazy microcosm cut off from reality, where everything was on the road to ruin, and where the foulest abuses and the most unfathomable ravings mingled with the maddest generosity. Everything was fragmenting to the point that one would soon be in a situation where there would no longer be an anarchist current, but only as many mutually incompatible anarchisms as there would be militants.

Henceforth, his only consolation was in the delight of a job well done. The picklock, the pliers, the skeleton key or the drill in his hand, as Bour and Ferré looked on attentively were then the only things that could revive him. One by one his apologia evaporated. He was reluctant to dwell upon them. Head down, he went on charging like a bull, thinking perhaps that if he just persevered, it would come all right. Preaching through example, giving of himself, because it is in the most difficult of circumstances when everything is crumbling all around, that one has to show what one is made of.

And then, perhaps he had also let himself be caught up in the mechanics of it all. Perhaps housebreaking had become second nature to him—an end in itself, the motives of which he did not concern himself sufficiently. Maybe, even when he had been shown the absurdity of what he was at, he would, even then, show himself to be incapable of calling a halt.

But in truth, no one dreamed of querying, within earshot of him, the legitimacy of his recovery undertaking.

## IV

*A personal letter to the jurors in the Jacob trial*

*Bourgeois,*

*You are called upon to sit in judgement of several of our comrades. According to what rights and what reasoning do you presume to sit in judgement of acts of whose basis and grandeur you are utterly ignorant?*

*You yourselves would be hard pressed to say! Foolishly you have set yourselves up as judges.*

*Now, know that the law and those who make it are banished from our logic.*

*As it happens you are the best of those laws. That is why we have for you a modicum of clemency. For whereas 26 of our people may be in your hands, on the outside we are quite numerous.*

*From the resolute attitude of our comrades, you must have noted that at no time has fear invaded their ranks. The same goes for us. In addition, we have a greater facility to act, since we are at liberty.*

*Even while the proceedings were in progress, we could have pulled off some great stroke, for death holds no terrors for us. Maybe we would have been numbered among the victims. But every one of you would have lost his life in the process.*

*Our Committee has thought it better to await your finding: but understand, you judgmental bourgeois that that is neither a retreat nor a defaulting upon the act to be carried out. It is only a delay.*

*Think on this, then, bourgeois which is the decision of our Committee.*

*Should your verdict cruelly strike at our comrades, that will be your condemnation to death: for your decision will have inspired ours.*

*Do not mistake this for an idle threat. Choose between:*

*A quiet life or Death.*

*Paris, 11 March 1905*

*International Terrorist Committee.*

In Reims, on the night of 24–25 February, the trio broke into the home of Monsieur Roger in the rue Werlé to discover a 550-kilo safe, from which around 7000 francs' worth of jewellery and silverware were removed.

To enter the house of the Widow Lhuillier in Vernon on the night of 28 February–1 March, Pélissard, but recently freed after the usual 6 months for breach of the residence ban, joined their number. That evening, before going into action, they quietly dined at the Hôtel de Paris, waited on by Lemieux.

The following day, in Angoulême, at 3 Rue Bouillond, they seized heaps of exotic items from the home of a Madame Ripoteau: monkey-skin rugs, panther skins, a stuffed panther, hunting knives, sabres—as well as the usual silverware and jewels.

*—The pelts taken from the home of Madame Ripoteau were purchased in the colonies. We know how officers make their purchases in the colonies! The war in China is an example of it!*

Ferré then decided to have a layoff. So Alexandre, Pélissard and Bour on the night of 27–28 March travelled without him to Tours, where they had decided to set about the cathedral. This was one of the most daring feats they had ever pulled off.

It all began with a mistake by Bour who had been sent ahead to 'case' the job but who had carelessly reconnoitred the place: the sacristy door was not made up of an oak panel as he had believed, but rather of a carved piece at least 15 centimetres thick and on which the sturdiest jemmies just broke. But Alexandre was not about to admit defeat.

In a building-site he came across a bricklayer's ladder, leaned it against the facade and clambered up as far as the rose window, used wire-cutters to remove the bars protecting it and then removed the lead from the glasses. Next, he attached his long silk ladder to the stonework and let himself slide down to the ground. Here a second disappointment lay in store: the connecting door between the nave and the presbytery was no more penetrable than the outside door. To be quite sure, he paid a visit to the collection boxes; not even enough to pay for a Mass.

Then he spotted the superb heavy tapestries, Aubusson creations from the 17th century, adorning the walls: the Nativity, the Three Magi, Jesus among the doctors, the Presentation at the Temple, the Flight into Egypt. For a collection, these were items beyond price.

It took all of his sailor's ingenuity to get them down, and then, amid the imposing silence of the vault, in the middle of the night, to set up a system of pulleys and cables capable of hoisting them up to the rose window. But manage it he did. Then, as they were too bulky to be carried on a man's back, he sent Pélissard off in search of a cart which he had spotted in the providential building site. In this fashion they were ferried as far as the railway station and then quite simply shipped to Paris by train.

During the trial, several journalists reiterated on the basis of an ill-considered statement by the prefect of police, Monsieur Hamard, that they had been found, cut up, in Alexandre's place in the

rue Leibnitz, with one segment serving as a door curtain and another as an armchair covering. The truth is rather brighter. Two of the tapestries had been sold to an English amateur—a maniac—who then wanted Alexandre to carry off, for his benefit, the tapestry from the Bayeux museum attributed to Bertha Bigfoot and depicting William the Conqueror's arrival in Great Britain. (An operation made impossible by the scale and weight of the object in any case).

As for the other three, they were quite skilfully touched up and coloured at the hands of Deschamps, the Champigny carpet-maker who was a friend of Charles the locksmith, for sale on the market. The subjects of the scenes had just been changed. The 'Adoration of the Magi', in particular, had become 'Vercingetorix at Alesia'...

Alexandre then went on a similar expedition to Le Mans cathedral. This was an even more perilous undertaking, for he did not have the benefit of a ladder here. The cathedral was under repair, but the scaffolding only helped him up the first few metres. Thereafter, he had to cling to the masonry, inch his way between the statues and dangle from the gargoyles above the void. It mattered little to him that the haul was scarcely in keeping with the prowess demanded of him: on such occasions he was prompted only by love of art, the very same love that had already led him one day into the towers of Notre Dame in Paris which had been sufficiently well guarded by an alarm system to oblige him to scurry away at speed.

This taste for a challenge, for a *performance*, also led him to indulge in a dangerous sport along with Lombardi-Vambelle who had once been an acrobat. The exercise consisted of this. They would stroll peaceably of an evening in the plushiest districts. Whenever they sighted an open window on the first or second floor, they tossed a little money in through it. If no one appeared, Lombardi climbed nimbly on to Alexandre's shoulders. From there he pulled himself up, jumped down into the room and in a few minutes scooped up whatever lay to hand. It was to this sort of angling that the American banker Pierpont Morgan, notably, owed the disappearance of a sumptuous gem collar in which the name of his beloved was spelled in gems.

His daring seemed to have increased tenfold: it was as if, scenting that the kill was imminent, he had chosen to go out on a high note. During his three year battle against society, he had scored dazzling personal victories. But the infantry—which is to say protagonists—had failed to follow up the spearhead troops whom he had mustered. He had given himself body and soul to the Cause. Not that the world had altered, however. Few comrades had taken selflessness to its ultimate. Thus he no longer had anything to lose. But he did have one thing to preserve: his honour. And his panache.

Around this time, Ferré recruited two new friends: Emile Augain, who was born on 22 February 1863 in Houdan, a locksmith extremely expert in opening doors and safes; he lived in Suresnes with his two sisters, anarchists as committed as himself, and the other was an Alsatian, Westermann who was born in Rischwiller on 20 July 1866 .. a painter and decorator, a happily married man, father of two pink, fresh-faced little girls, a counterfeiter out of necessity and anarchist by conviction, who lived at 11 rue Saulnier in Puteaux. Ferré had made their acquaintance at a public gathering. Moreover, he had no complaints to make of them: on the night of 6–7 April, Augain opened the safe without a hitch for him at the widow Garmuchot's in the rue d'Albuféra in Vernon: they made off with some kilos of silverware and securities from inside.

Indeed it was not from that quarter that the trouble came, but from Jacob himself. Jacob, despite an attack of fever and coughing fits that keep him bedridden for eight days in a semicoma, had, on grounds of sheer professional conscientiousness, to participate in a new expedition which he

had scheduled. It was a trick of fate. Illness or mental laziness: it was to be an accumulation of errors.

On 21 April, by the evening train, along with Pélissard he rejoined Bour (who had been entrusted with placing the 'seals') in Abbeville. Their evening stroll led them straight to the home of Madame Tilloloy at 5 place Saint-Pierre. Alexandre has given his personal account of that tragic night and 'the arrest of Arsène Lupin', the astonishing defeat of Fantômas, an event so curious that one might be tempted to describe it as almost voluntary, in a piece published by *Germinal* in April 1907 under the title of 'Memoires of a Rebel'.

'Enlightened by experience—he wrote—I summed the door up at a glance as impregnable. Like those ancient church portals equipped with sturdy hinges, the door did not afford and could not afford any purchase. I pointed this out to my comrades: but Pélissard did not share my opinion. He tried to force it. His efforts were in vain.

—We'd be better busy tackling the ventilation shaft in the vault—I told him.

'This idea proved acceptable and, after a few heave-ho's the grille was torn away. I immediately went to carry it under a side door which lay a few metres from Abbeville's Nouvelles Galeries opposite the lodging and offices of the tax collector, lest it be sighted by passers-by. During my brief absence, Bour had tried to slip into the vault, but, hindered by an iron bar positioned horizontally in the cavity of the basement window, had been unable to do so. In the face of this difficulty I did not persist. Instead I looked for another access. I stepped out into the middle of the street, the better to survey the building.'

A third route seemed to be required: it passed in through the first floor windows, the shutters of which '...were placed quite outside the recess, so that one had only to work them up and down in order to heave them out of their hinges.' A silk ladder would be thrown up to give access to them.

First worrying slip-up: once the shutters had been lifted off, instead of using his glass-cutter to break a pane, while trapping the broken glass with a suction pad, as he had always done, he gave it an almighty punch. It was 1 am. The noise of the breaking glass echoed in the virtually unbroken silence.

A few moments later, Bour whistled the tune of *Père Duchesne*: a man had just emerged at a run from the building opposite and made off in the direction of the rue Saint-Wulfran. It was Monsieur Leleu, a cafe owner from 2 rue Alfred-François. He was tormented by a toothache. When the noise had rung out he had been desperately pacing his room, stamping his feet. He had heard it. Had looked outside. And spotted them.

'—Damn! That's the way to the police station—I told them.—Maybe it's some dedicated citizen. In any case I'm going to tail him. Stay there. I'll be back in a moment.

'My mission was quickly completed. Opening the shutters to jump down on to the pavement, I spotted a woman's head in a window-frame of the building opposite. As my comrades had spotted the apparition at the same time as I had, the twinkling of an eye brought all three of us into the street.

'Here—she cried out—there are still three of them!

'Then she quickly shut the window. No doubt about it, the danger was real enough. It was not a question of a hallucination such as those who are on the lookout often experience.'

Alexandre's second carelessness: rather than let the group disperse, he decided that they would head off peacefully to await a train somewhere, in the outskirts of Abbeville.



‘Let’s go then!—I said to Péliissard.—These police guys aren’t as dedicated as you think. Once they have verified the break-in, they’ll be off home, keen to get back to their beds. Then, tomorrow morning, they’ll continue their inquiries. Anyway, this isn’t the first time this sort of thing has happened to me...’

But a third person was up and about in Abbeville: a young servant-girl. She saw them leave town by the Saint-Gilles gate and make towards Pont-Rémy, two kilometres away. Inspectors, detectives and gendarmes, weary of combing the town and suburbs to no avail, were indeed about to give up the chase when two of them, Brigadier Auquier and constable Léonard Pruvost spotted her. They promptly set off at speed for Pont-Rémy.

The three robbers reached the village at 2.00 am. The train for Boulogne-sur-Mer, through where they aimed to continue their tour, would not be passing through until 5.30 am. It was raining. The station was closed. They came across a signalman, who, taking them for railway employees, offered them the hospitality of his box. The third slip-up: instead of playing the role which this good fellow had credited them with, Alexandre questioned him about his life. The man was no rebel. Alexandre grew edgy, as he always did in the presence of a *sheep*. He wanted to explain to him how the exploited, by their passive acceptance of their lot, became the accessories of the exploiters. How it was the spinelessness of the flock which stayed the hand of the liberators. Beaten, humiliated and content to be so, or rather too cowardly to revolt, expecting deliverance to be Heaven-sent, folk like this one made any revolution an impossibility. The guy reminded him only too well of the attitude of the rubbernecking citizens of Cherbourg after he had burgled the Admiral du Pontaumont’s home.

‘Excuse me—he said to me—I have to go man the signals for the 3.14 express’.

‘Out he went.

‘A few minutes later, the express swept through like a blue streak. At the sight of all those carriages loaded with wealthy travellers—perhaps shareholders in the railroad company—screaming along the rails at dizzying speed, and liable to be reduced to fragments by a grain of sand, so to speak, I thought of the signalman whose words were still ringing in my ears... *I’ll have a pension... I’m an honest fellow, I work!*

‘It was at that point that I grasped all of the moral potency of that prejudice. To believe oneself honest because of one’s slavery! It was there that I also grasped the power of this brake on rebellion! Expectation of a pension. Good on you, bourgeois! Your reign over the people still has a lot of life left in it! You’ll have nothing to fear as long as your ignorant victims are poisoned by the expectation of a pension and by the idiotic belief that they are honest because they are dying of hunger.’

His revulsion against injustice gave way to a revulsion against those who failed to revolt: he had come full circle. Loneliness. Impotence. Anguish. His efforts derided.

The station was opened at 5.15 am. The trio stepped inside.

‘Just as I was stepping up to the ticket office, two men streaked in. All of a sudden, without any prior explanation, Brigadier Auquier (constable Pruvost was with him) called out in a voice that would have been a credit to an actor:

‘There they are, the thieves from the place Saint-Pierre! There they are! The ones who robbed Monsieur de la Rivière!’<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Apart from Monsieur de la Rivière’s house (burgled on 17 September 1902 by Jacob, Ferré and Ferrand) Jacob and Ferré had also, as we have seen, burgled the church of Saint-Jacques in Abbeville on 23 December 1903.

'These three exclamations followed one upon the other, without interruption. I think I may even add, without a pause for breath, for his face became as red as an abattoir floor' Really! This poor fellow had no tact, no prudence! Did he expect to pin us to the spot with talk? Alas!

'Words were of no avail. Actions were called for. I took two steps back and, with my revolver in one hand and my dagger in the other, I shouted:

'—Let us through, by God, or I'll open fire!

'—What! Armed?—shouted a terrified Auquier and Pruvost.

'—Yes,... armed!... Now what?...

'At which the struggle began. It was short-lived but furious. Suddenly, Pruvost hurled himself on Pélissard, seizing him from behind, grabbing him around the waist. Thus embraced, Pélissard found himself well tested: and although endowed with considerable brawn, he certainly would not have gained the upper hand had Bour not come to his aid. The latter, seeing his friend endangered, had no hesitation in opening fire on the Constable who, shot through the heart, released Pélissard and sank on to his knees on the ground, mumbling: 'I'm dead!'

'Thus freed, Pélissard displayed his superior leg-power by taking to his heels, without a further thought for his comrades.

'Auquier closed on me, trying to grab my arms in order to disarm me: but I immediately forced him to release me by stabbing him in the left hip with my dagger. At that very moment Nacavant—*Nacavant the signalman, the very same who only minutes before had shaken our hand, desirous of showing that he was what in civics is called a devoted citizen*—turned up to reinforce the police. Coming upon the scene via the door which gave on to the tracks, he seized me roughly from behind and sent me spinning to the back of the room. The unexpectedness of the attack, and the force with which I had been pushed sent me sprawling at full length across the floor. I, of course, made to spring to my feet immediately: but Auquier and Nacavant had other ideas. Furiously, they rushed at me... My position was as critical as could be. At one point, the barrel of my gun was pressed up against my chest in the region of my heart. And it was truly miraculous that it did not go off under pressure of the nervous twitching of my fingers. For some seconds, I hovered there 'twixt life and death. Happily for me, Bour arrived to help me out of my difficulty. As soon as he had freed Pélissard, he had advanced from the back of the room, aiming at Nacavant.

'—Have pity! Mercy!—cried this upright but terrified citizen. Whereupon he abandoned me and fled into the office of the station-master. Another station employer—Rulfier—followed his example and beat a retreat. Bour, seeing no sign of Pélissard whom he had just helped free himself, took to his heels in turn.

'I was left on my own, grappling with Auquier. At the precise moment when Nacavant let me go, a shot rang out from my revolver: no one was hit. At the sound of the detonation, either because he wanted to check whether he had been hit, or for some other reason, Auquier let go of me also. In a flash I tripped him and he fell on to the floor. But his grip on me was so sure that I tumbled with him in his fall. Not that we stayed on the ground for long. Each of us sprang nimbly to our feet.'

Round two: pinned by Auquier's arms, Jacob was hauled back in the direction of the waiting-room. Pruvost, mortally wounded, came to long enough to tackle Jacob's legs. Jacob fell, Auquier on top of him. Ignorant of Pruvost's condition, Jacob poked him with his dagger. He fired a shot at Auquier: it hit Pruvost. Auquier let go, then grabbed his wrists from behind. Jacob stepped back, ramming him as hard as he could against the brickwork. Auquier let go.

Round three: Auquier stormed back. Jacob took aim at him. Auquier buried his head in his arms. Jacob hit him in the chest. A rib deflected the bullet. End of the first engagement. Jacob took to his heels. 'I couldn't see any sign of Bour or Pélissard. That being no time for daydreaming or standing on ceremony, I made haste to quit the scene of battle.'

But some passers-by were already busily transporting the wounded to hospital. Others tipped off Monsieur Stemler, the public prosecutor—who arrived in the company of Monsieur Atté, the investigating magistrate, and of several gendarmes. They jumped into an automobile. They were told of the bandits' presence in a small copse. A beat was organised. One fugitive was soon recaptured in the Airaisnes marshes: it was Pélissard.

As for Alexandre, he covered a few kilometres. From atop a knoll, he had a panoramic view of the surrounding scene through a telescope: 'It wasn't one of those ancient *crocks* one finds on display in some bazaar, but a most powerful telescope: I beg you to believe that it was no rubbish.' Indeed: it had lately belonged to Admiral Aubry de la Noë. Jacob saw the whole countryside agog. The locals were prepared for a beat.

'Desperate straits call for desperate remedies. After the fashion of the Greek who cut off his god's tail in order to avert the attention of his detractors, I determined to put a torch to the woods wherein I was sheltering... I cut down whatever branches I could from the tree up which I had taken refuge... Then I clambered down and made several small pyres around the trunks of some trees. Next... next I had to stop right there, for while the idea was not a bad one, I should add that everything conspired to make it impracticable. In my haste, I had forgotten that I was not in the Bouches-du-Rhône where this play had worked for me once before when an incident befell me on the estates of the Marquis de Forbin. I was not in Provence now, but in the land of drizzle, and mist and mud and *bistouilles* ('moonshine'). Rain and mist are not exactly the best factors in setting a wood ablaze. All my matches had been exposed to the damp. Then again, not merely were the trees waterlogged but it was April, late April, a time when the sap courses through every fibre of the wood. A really lousy piece of luck, what? Having no more matches, I had no option but to forego the Alcibiade stratagem.'

In his haste, he forgot the telescope: 'Such a beautiful telescope! One would put oneself out for less than that, right? But what the hell! I said to myself after a moment. I'll have no problems finding an admiral to offer me another one.'

An old man, to whom he passed himself off as a smuggler and father of two, gave him directions as to the route to follow. He then noticed that he had lost his bowler hat in the brawling and he crossed paths with a young man: 'Since the bit about the two kids took in the Old Father Time there, it really would be the devil if I were to fail with this innocent. And before he had had any time to think, I begged him to let me have his cap!'

Cap on head, he saw two gendarmes on horseback advancing towards him. His forth, or fifth slip-up. But it was not to prove fatal for him. 'I was tired, very tired, and the prospect of going horseback was not exactly an unpleasant one. Even then I was looking for an opening to topple them from their *nags*. The one on the left especially looked inviting in his chocolate-brown coat: already I could imagine myself on his back, eating up the kilometres, leaving my enemies behind. Twenty metres from them I cocked my revolver, holding it in my pocket, ready to open fire in that position and then, with my free hand, I saluted them, army-style.'

The gendarmes, who came from Véry-Aumont and not Pont-Rémy returned his salute. They were oblivious of all that was going on.

In Dreuil Jacob entered an inn. He passed himself off there as an antique-dealer on the lookout for furniture. The peasants rallied round to sell him grandmother's clock and Uncle Charles's chest of drawers. But news of the skirmish had reached even them. So Alexandre set off again in the direction of Airaisnes.

'Airaisnes... That word for me spells catastrophe. My Waterloo. My Hundred Days lasted only 5 hours. How everything devalues!'

In fact, a few hundred metres outside the village, a car pulled up sharply alongside him: a car belonging to the public prosecutor. How come he had not heard its approach? Why didn't he hide himself? No doubt his fever played some part in it all. But it cannot be the full explanation. 'I was in one of those stages of prostration when one sees without really seeing, touches without really feeling or lives without really living' he comments starkly. He was questioned; he spluttered an answer. They asked to see his papers: he usually so well organised, had none to present. After 150 admitted robberies, some of which had been models of their sort: after having built up an astounding organisation, he suddenly behaved like some amateur. An unlikely, inexplicable attitude, unless one remembers that for some hours, days or weeks past he had subconsciously assumed *the attitude of a beaten man*. Unless of course he came in the end to believe in his own invulnerability.

He was bundled into the car. He climbed in without demur. And then one last fit seized him.

'I was looking at the countryside which offered itself in view: rolling by like moving-picture frames: the trees, meadows, fields, haystacks, the heaps of stones scattered at intervals along the most distant road, the peasant and his two horses, yoked to cart, tilling the soil: I drank it all in with my eyes and said to myself: 'Is this it, then? Is this the last you'll see of it all?' My thoughts were of those whom I was leaving behind, my loved ones, my relations, my friends, my spouse, my mother whom I had left ailing and bedridden in the wake of a surgical operation. At that thought, a squall of rebellion rose to my head, as I seethed with anger:

'What! Am I blithely to attend my own funeral rites! I said to myself, recovering a little of my vigour under the prick of remembrance. Why defend yourself? Why kill? Imbecile!... But if you don't defend yourself, if you don't kill them, they will be the ones to kill you. What! The sheep bleats, the ox bellows, the pig grunts, they all issue a cry of revolt as they head for the slaughter, they struggle and wrestle and resist to escape their executioners and you, a *man*, are you to go with head bowed to the scaffold?'

They hadn't even searched him. His Browning was still in his pocket. He slipped his hand in slowly, hid the revolver up a sleeve and withdrew his arm... A jolt. The weapon slid on to the running-board. And tumbled on to the road without the police's even noticing.

In Pont-Rémy he came face to face with Péliissard again. They were placed on board a train for Abbeville. There the Caudine Forks set aside for the defeated awaited them. There was no way around it. The respectable folk jeered them. Pitiful slaves. 'There were 80 chasseurs on horseback making up the square. The captain of gendarmerie marched at the front with sword unsheathed. We were positioned in the centre of the square for our own protection. Ah, my children! What a racket! In every tone and at every pitch, from the sharp and shrill voices of children to the raucous, grave tones of men, through the reedy sounds of women's voices, the cries of... 'Kill them! To the water! To the guillotine!' did not let up for a single instant between the railway station and the prison. This whole crowd followed the cortege, trying to break through the barrier formed by the horses, surging forwards and backwards like an undulating sea, buffeting and jogging one another, falling to the ground and even being trampled, only to rise again to shout even louder.'

Just as they were entering Abbeville prison, the chief warder's wife hurled herself on him and bit his wrist. But for his escort of cavalry, he would have been lynched. No, the people were not well informed.

## V

*Gentlemen,*

*You know now who I am, a rebel living off the proceeds of his burglaries. Moreover, I have burned several mansions and defended my liberty against the aggression of the agents of authority. I have made a clean breast of my whole life of struggle: I place it as a problem before your understanding. Acknowledging no one's right to judge me, I seek neither pardon nor clemency. I make no petition of those whom I hate and hold in contempt. You are the stronger: do with me what you will. Dispatch me to the penal colony or to the scaffold, it scarcely matters. But before we take our leave of one another, let me address one last word to you (...)*

*You summon a man a robber and bandit and you enforce the rigours of the law against him without wondering if he could have been otherwise. Has the rentier ever been seen who has turned his hand to housebreaking? I confess I know of none such. But as for myself, who is neither a rentier nor a property-owner, who is but a man with naught but his arms and his brain to keep him alive, I have had to conduct myself differently. Society affords me but three ways of surviving: work, beggary and theft. Work, far from being repugnant to me pleases me. Indeed man cannot do without work: his muscles and his brain are possessed of a sum of energy which must be expended. What I have found repugnant is the sweating of blood and water for the alms of a wage, and the creation of wealth of which I would have been deprived. In short, I found it repugnant to yield myself up to the prostitution of work. Beggary is degradation and the negation of all dignity. Every man is entitled to a seat at the banquet of life.*

*ONE DOES NOT BEG THE RIGHT TO LIVE. ONE TAKES IT.*

*Theft is restitution, recovery of possession. Rather than being closed in a factory, like in some penitentiary, rather than beg for that to which I was entitled, I have preferred to rebel and to fight my enemies toe to toe by waging war on the rich and attacking their wealth.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, I imagine that you would have preferred me to submit to your laws, in that as a docile, spineless worker, I should create wealth in return for a pittance of a wage that, body used up and brain numbed, I should crawl away to die on some street corner. Then you would not be calling me a 'cynical bandit' but instead an 'honest worker'. Using flattery, you might even have awarded me the medal of labour. The priests promise paradise to those they gull: you are less given to abstractions; you promise them a scrap of paper.*

*Many thanks to you for so much kindness, so much gratitude, Gentlemen! I prefer to be a cynic aware of his rights rather than an automaton, a caryatid!*

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<sup>16</sup> Here Jacob, with a discreet silence, glosses over the role of the police in the shape of Inspector Fabre in the choice of his destiny.

*Ever since I came into possession of my conscience, I indulged myself in theft without the slightest scruple. I do not fall for your alleged morality which preaches respect for property as a virtue, when there are no thieves worse than property-owners!*

*Count yourselves lucky, Gentlemen, that this prejudice has taken root in the people, for there lies your finest gendarme. Conscious of the importance of the law, or, more precisely, of force, you have made it the staunchest of your protectors. But beware, for there is a season unto everything. All that is built and erected by force and by trickery, can be demolished by force and trickery.*

*Day by day, the people are evolving. Don't you see that, enlightened as to these truths and conscious of their rights, all the starvelings, all the beggars, in short, all your victims are going to pick up a crowbar and set about your homes so as to seize back the wealth which they created and which you have stolen from them? Do you think their misfortune would be any the greater for it? I think not. If they were to ponder it well, they would opt rather to brave any risk rather than let you grow fat while they were in poverty. Prison...Penal Settlement... The scaffold, it will be said! But what is the prospect of these beside a brutalised existence comprising every sort of suffering? The miner who wrests his living from the bowels of the earth, never seeing the light of day, might perish at any moment, the victim of a firedamp explosion; the roofer scrambling about on roofs may fall and be smashed to pieces; the sailor knows the day when he is to set sail, but not when he will return to port. A fair number of other workers contract deadly illnesses in the pursuit of their trade, exhausting themselves, poisoning themselves, killing themselves to create for you; even the gendarmes and police, your lackeys, sometimes meet their death in the struggle they wage against your foes, all for the bone you toss them to gnaw upon.*

*Immovable in your narrow selfishness, you remain sceptical of this view, don't you? The people are scared you seem to say. We govern them through fear of repression: if they cry out, we will toss them in prison; if they say a word, we will deport them to the penal colony; if they make a move we will guillotine them! You are mistaken in your reckoning, Gentlemen, believe me! The penalties you inflict are no remedy against acts of rebellion. Repression, far from offering remedy, let alone a palliative, merely exacerbates the problem.*

*Coercive measures cannot but sow the seeds of hatred and vengeance. It is a deadly circle. Moreover, since you have been slicing off heads and populating the prisons and penal colonies have you prevented hatred from showing itself? Well? Answer! The facts demonstrate your powerlessness. For my part, I was perfectly well aware that my conduct could have no outcome other than the penal settlement or the scaffold. You have to see that that did not prevent me from acting. If I gave myself up to thieving, it was not a matter of gain, or lucre but a matter of principle, a question of right. I preferred to retain my liberty, my independence, my dignity as a man, than turn into the architect of the fortune of some master. To put it more bluntly, and less euphemistically, I opted to be robber rather than robbed.*

*To be sure, I too deplore the act by which one man lays hands by violence and deception upon the fruits of another's labour. But it is for that very reason that I have made war*

on the rich, who thief the wealth of the poor. *I too would rather live in a society from which theft would be banished. I do not approve of stealing, and have resorted to it only as the proper means by which to combat the most iniquitous of all theft: individual ownership.*

*To eradicate an effect one must first remove the cause. If theft exists, it is only because there is plenty on one side and scarcity on the other: only because everything belongs only to a handful. THE STRUGGLE WILL NOT END UNTIL MEN PLACE THEIR JOYS AND SORROWS IN COMMON, ALONG WITH THEIR LABOURS AND THEIR WEALTH, WHEN EVERYTHING WILL BELONG TO ALL.*

*As a revolutionary anarchist, I have made my revolution. May it hasten the advent of Anarchy.*

Monsieur Atté, the examining magistrate from Abbeville, questioned Jacob and Pélissard, whom a dozen witnesses had identified, without success. Alexandre denied everything: the robbery at Monsieur de la Rivière's as well as the one in the Place Saint-Pierre. He insisted that he was Escande, antique-dealer. Pélissard passed himself off as Leon Edme. From Bohemia. They were travelling on business.

Unfortunately, a ring belonging to M. de la Rivière was found in Escande's pockets (How stupid can one get? To set out on a job carrying the remnants of a robbery committed in the very town one is going to!...) along with a scrap of paper bearing these words, half obliterated... 'Escande', and then, 'Ornano'...

Monsieur Atté dispatched a letter rogatory to M. Lascoux, his colleague in Paris, urging the latter to uncover the true identities of these lawbreakers, their accomplices and if at all possible, their home addresses. This order was communicated to M. Hamard, the Sûreté chief who conducted the inquiry briskly.

Three days later, on a Sunday, Hamard discovered 'Escande's' former address at 14 boulevard Ornano. Within a few hours he had followed the trail as far as the rue Leibnitz. In 'Escande's' apartment, he found several clocks, bronzes and silken shawls and silverware—and two women. One of them 'about 50 years old', claimed to be an Elisa Berthou: that was Marie. The other 'aged about 26', claimed to be Berthe Béziat: this was Rose. Both claimed never to have heard of Escande or any robberies. Hamard, not the least taken in, had them taken in and laid a trap.

On 23 April, a Tuesday, 'a young fair-haired man' whose appearance fitted the description which had been given by witnesses in Abbeville and who had just got off the train from Boulogne at the Gare du Nord, walked into the trap: it was Bour.

Annoyed, exhausted and panicky about Alexandre's disappearance, when questioned closely he admitted the burglary at the place Saint-Pierre and the one in Tours. Only to retract his admission. But by then he had already said too much: he had let slip the name of Alice-Léontine.

Under skilful interrogation, Alice-Léontine, whether out of spite, carelessness or downright stupidity, told what little she knew. Bour winced. Pélissard shrugged his shoulders. Alexandre launched into a discourse on the theoretical propriety of theft to his interrogators. He preached so much and so well about anarchy to his guards that he had to be handed over to others from Paris. As for specific details or the names of his confederates, not a word could they get out of him.

Nonetheless the Sûreté chief chased up the lead provided by the young girl who was so untidy with the cooking pots.

First, he tackled the famous Ferré couple, concierges in the rue Labrouste. To no avail. They had scarpered and left no forwarding address. (They had hastily leased an apartment at 26 rue de Lagny).

Whereupon M. Hamard turned to M. Bertillon's anthropometric records—a resource whose usefulness was still highly controversial, but which had just been used for the first time with success on 16 October 1902 in connection with the murder of a dentist's manservant.

Flicking through these files he eventually came upon the existence of a certain Clarenson, then being held in La Santé. The name meant something to Alice. The pair were brought face to face. Clarenson failed to recognise her. He recognised nobody. He had not had any hand in the rue Quincampoix job. He could not understand what they wanted of him: he was innocent.

As for his little girlfriend, Antoinette Bernard, the widow Amiglio whom Alice had mentioned, she remained unlocatable: in fact she had fled to Matha's and Matha had sent her to the country.

Hamard then paid a call on Baudy 'the loser' in his prison cell in Thouars: only to meet with the same pigheadedness, the same silence. Julia Ruffa, his latest girlfriend, who had replaced Rose's sister, did not know a thing either. Then it was Vaillant's turn. Ditto. Then Ferrand. Alexandre's erstwhile right hand man contented himself with a sneer. They could not get him to utter a syllable. But Hamard traced his mistress, Gabrielle Damiens, thanks to his informers. There, at last the breakthrough came: Gabrielle had scores to settle with Alexandre for his rejection of her advances and with Ferrand for his infidelities.

She made no bones about relating in fine detail what she knew about the gang. She had seen lots of things. And remembered many. She was a veritable encyclopedia. She was put into cold storage in Saint-Lazare. In the event of there being any doubts on any detail, he had only to trot along and consult her. She would promptly reveal the address, circumstance or meeting-place they were after. You would think she took an exquisite delight in telling tales.

On 14 October, the gold and silver smelting team of Brunus, Apport and Limonnier was rounded up. Apport had attempted, in vain, to tamper with the books 24 hours previously: they contained the dates on which Brunus had sold ingots—they coincided with the dates of Jacob's burglaries.

On 30 October, it was Ferré's turn in Angers, following a tumultuous brawl with inspector Izord. Ferré was along with Augain, one of the two latest recruits. Augain was freed for lack of evidence, on 21 November. Only to be re-arrested. Westermann, recruit number two, a painter and decorator from Puteaux, had had time to get offside. He was tracked down a few weeks later.

At the end of October, Angèle Bononi, Ferré's wife, was traced to 195 avenue des Grésillons in Gennevilliers where she had been taken on as a general maid with the Sortais couple.

Then it was Charles the locksmith, the tool-repairman, on 3 February 1904. Charles had been naive enough to confess to the business of the pearls found in a corner of his workshop after the rue Quincampoix job.

Next came Alcide Ader, Ferré's pal, the carpenter who had run away from the house-breakings in which he had been involved. Sautarel, the jeweller-writer, was run to ground in Vincennes. Bonnefoy the adventurer, husband of the music-hall singer had been apprehended on 15 April 1904 when the steamship *Cao-Bang* put in at Djibouti. He had booked the passage to Saigon in the name of Arsac. Aiming to make a new life for himself in Indochina. He would get his new life all right, in a penal settlement, a less welcoming prospect.

With the exception of three important runaways—Vambelle alias Lombardi, or was it vice versa, the acrobat; Deschamps, the Champigny carpet maker who had so artfully reworked the



'Adoration of the Magi' from the Tours Cathedral; Henry whom Alexandre despised for having overdosed a wealthy old lady with chloroform—and two other sometime confederates, Gaudin and Federmann—the police soon concluded that they had the whole gang behind bars. Alexandre gave them every encouragement to think so.

As soon as all the accused were assembled in Abbeville prison for proceedings to begin, he copied out the Morse code on scraps of paper, for the use of each of them. Thus they were able to communicate without hindrance by tapping gently on the pipes. He promptly passed on definite instructions which were followed to the letter. His strategy was simple 1) Say nothing of friends who had not been caught. 2) Try to spare those least compromised by systematically denying their involvement no matter how improbable. 3) He would accuse himself of all the offences, even those he had not committed—since he was now too late to keep quiet about them all. 4) Dispose of the two snitches imprisoned in Saint-Lazare.

He personally looked to this last point, as is proven by a letter sent out to the Parisian comrades, urging them to... 'prevent Gabrielle Amiens and Léontine Tissaud from testifying at the assizes *by hook or by crook*'. In which he was only half obeyed: in fact, one morning Gabrielle the snitch was found mysteriously poisoned in her cell (to avert controversy, the prosecutor's office opted to conclude that it had been suicide). But Alice Léontine was more fortunate: she survived. In any case her testimony was less significant.

The other items of the plan were equally meticulously implemented. For instance Alexandre tried desperately to give the impression that it had been he who had killed constable Pruvost. Firearms expert, Monsieur Gastine-Renette attempted to prove the contrary thanks to ballistic discrepancies he had noted between the barrel of Jacob's gun and the bullet which had killed Pruvost. Alexandre showered him with sarcastic remarks. Bour, his latest student, his protege was blameless. He had need of him. Right up to the trial, he was to keep him out of it.

'I no longer have anybody on this earth to worry about me,' the young man wrote him from his cell. 'My parents have cursed me. They replied to a letter that I had written them with nonsense and make no effort to ease my lot by sending me any money. So I have no one left but you and now I learn that you are ill. Why don't you look after yourself?'

'I am indeed ill', Jacob answered him, 'but although I'm spitting blood I think I can attend the Assizes. If my ailment, which I believe to be beyond cure, were to cause me too much suffering, be assured that I could end it. We are in this earth not to suffer, but to enjoy (...) A mother, you see, is all mankind. Let me have the address of yours and your father-in-law's. I'll write them myself about my way of thinking (...) Do not worry yourself too much about the trial. You will speak as you see fit. Your lawyer will set out his thoughts. That's the regulation, right? Don't make any fuss, don't create a scandal, speak few words but speak purposefully, vigorously and gave our theories an airing. What matter what will happen? But know, all the same, that we can expect nothing good of bourgeois justice.' Just like a colonel exhorting his troops prior to throwing them into an attack on an impregnable fortress.

Pélissard's moral held firm throughout the proceedings. It no longer occurred to him to complain about the laws on residence bans: 'The government is really brimming with good will towards me', he wrote to Alexandre. 'At no cost, it is going to lay on for me a trip which I have long wanted to make. I am to be able, then, to go to Guyane. What celebrations there will be when we are all together there! (...) You are right. The trial will prove most amusing. There will be the Parisian newspapers, and Parisian lawyers. We will avail of it to air our views in public and to strike terror into the magistrates with our answers. We're going to shake the edifice of society

to its very foundations (...) And then maybe the fall of some minister will come to help us tie the judiciary up in knots, eh?’

Thus, from his prison cell where he ‘was spitting blood’, physically half dead, Alexandre went on leading his gang of rebels as he had done for a good two years at liberty, devising a hundred ways of communicating with the outside world without being caught<sup>17</sup>, boosting flagging moral, stalking the snitches, orchestrating their answers to questioning and to confrontations with witnesses, blatantly defying the courts: beaten, to be sure, but unbowed. Escape? He considered it at the beginning of those two long years in custody. But by this time he was too weakened to go off darting across rooftops.

By the time he had regained his health a few months later, he had quite a different consideration to induce him temporarily to abandon the scheme: a captain does not abandon his stricken vessel. He alone had within his grasp the tangled web of his intrigues. He alone could cover up leads because he alone knew what the police were searching for. Were he to disappear the others would go to pieces. Marie and Rose might receive severe sentences. The comrades would not be able to step around the snares laid daily by Monsieur Atté. Moreover, what an unexpected platform this trial would provide with all of the bourgeois newspapers likely to be in attendance! What a chance to make propaganda! One could not let such an opening slip. If there were to be any escapes, it would have to be only once the trial had begun.

And so, towards the end of 1903, he alerted the Paris comrades to this by means of coded messages. It was at that point that several of them set up in Amiens. It was also then, on his recommendation, and thanks largely to his capital reserves, secret funds covertly built up for just such an occasion, that *Germinal* was set up.

But Ferrand had no grounds for displaying any such scruples. Since his arrest in Abbeville in May 1903, he had been a cell-mate of a little alcoholic fraudster called Collevaert who had been convicted of ‘adulterating foodstuffs’ and who was due for release soon. It occurred to Alexandre that he might capitalise upon this coincidence. Alexandre, once informed, gave him every encouragement along these lines. With a mixture of promises and threats, Ferrand managed to persuade the man to do him a number of favours. The plan was exquisitely clever. Unfortunately, Ferrand was ignorant of developments on the outside and of the measure of Collevaert’s reliability. Collevaert was to:

1. Seek out Gabrielle Damiens, alias Minette, at 31 rue Jean-de-Beauvais, at Monsieur Sautais’s hotel. From him she was to receive some letters addressed post-restante to the local post office. Their contents would be of little significance. The message would be concealed beneath the stamp. She was to be very careful lest she be followed on her way to the post office (poor Ferrand, to be so out of touch!). She was to reply using the same methods. She was to sign herself: ‘Your cousin Baron.’

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<sup>17</sup> We know of at least four of them. Writing a harmless message, with a second message scribbled between the lines with acid: one need only heat the sheet of paper slightly to bring out the second message. A harmless message with the second written in acid on a sheet of cigarette paper folded under the postage stamp. Certain letters written in the sentences in slightly larger characters: taken together, these spell out the real message. Perforate the paper on which one writes in pinholes corresponding to a Morse alphabet. Jacob used two systems simultaneously, one visible, one invisible. So that even if his envelopes were intercepted, the police only uncovered what he wanted them to get sight of. These different systems were arranged long in advance with his correspondents specifically for use in such circumstances.

2. Seek out Sautarel at 74 Cours de Vincennes. Fearing searches, Sautarel had to had quit his jewellery shop in the Boulevard Beaumarchais. (In fact, he was on the verge of being arrested, thanks to the diligence of 'cousin Baron'.) He was to send money: and write using the same ploy as above: and sign himself 'Your Uncle Libert'.
3. Concerning Sautarelle: he was to be told that he need fear no denunciation, neither by Ferrand nor by 'Georges' (Jacob).
4. Seek out Matha at *Le Libertain* at 15 rue d'Orsel. As much space as possible was to be devoted to them in the paper. He was to send some money, if possible. And prepare for any eventuality. And especially have a hideout and phoney papers at the ready. (Alexandre too, wrote to Matha, but used no go-between).
5. Seek out Châlus, the brothel-keeper who hung out at the Veyssade restaurant in the rue du Château d'Eau where he was known by the name 'hunter' on account of his being always in hunting rig. Châlus was to write to Ferrand, using the usual method. Gabrielle ('cousin Baron') was to let him know the date on which he should bring the tools needed for the break-out. These tools were to be handed to a comrade from Abbeville who was to conceal them in the soles of his shoes, before letting himself be picked up for vagrancy.
6. Finally, seek out Charles the locksmith in the avenue Parmentier in Champigny. A big red key by way of a sign above the door marked the place. Tell him to make a hacksaw as well as a picklock to open the locks on his shackles in the event of Ferrand's being moved to a different prison.

All of this was very well worked out , so much so that Maurice Leblanc was to have no hesitation in borrowing from some of Ferrand's ruses, mingled with some of Jacob's for his *L'Evasion d'Arsène Lupin*. Not of course, without embroidering them with a wave of his magic wand.<sup>18</sup>

Alas, but Ferrand's Machiavellian scheme was not to know the same complete success that it would deliver to the blessed Lupin. Since Collevaert, without inducement, 'spilled the beans' partly out of cowardice and out of fear of becoming 'caught up in a dirty business', Monsieur Atté had merely to collect Ferrand's various pieces of correspondence. As anticipated, they were addressed to: C.C. (*Charles Collevaert, 22 Poste restante, 7 rue des Archives, Paris*). In them Ferrand passed himself off as Collevaert's brother, a provincial notary. Under the stamp on the 7 December letter those words were discovered! 'Friend, do not abandon me. Pay no heed to those who

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<sup>18</sup> Here are just a few details. 1) Messages which Lupin received in prison from the outside were written on sheets of cigarette paper rolled up inside cigars. As in real life. The messages were to be intercepted by police. But Lupin, just like Jacob, had done this precisely to be discovered in order to allay suspicions. 2) At the preliminary hearing Lupin adopted exactly the same stance as Jacob and refused to talk, or else claimed credit for all the offences committed: 'and indeed, Arsen Lupin was not much given to talk. For months passed, Monsieur Jules Bouvier, the examining magistrate, had striven in vain to get him to talk 3 cont (...) From time to time, out of politeness [he] gave in ... 'but of course, Monsieur Juge, we are agreed: the Credit Lyonnais job, the Rue de Babylon job (...) the break-ins at the castles of Armesnil, Gouret, Imblevan, Les Groseilliers, Le Malaquais, all of them were the work of your servant (...) I admit it all en bloc and even ten times as much as you suppose.' 3) Just as Jacob had 'his' papers in the shape of *Le Libertain* and then *Germinal*, where those of his comrades who were at liberty could set out their thoughts, so Lupin had his, in *L'Echo de France*, through which he could issue messages: it carried the account of his aborted escape attempt. 4) In the end, Lupin escaped thanks to the collusion of a tramp Desire Boudru who... 'lived on charity and slept in one of those rag and bone men's huts huddled close to the Les Ternes customs house'.

discourage you. You are all I have left now. The investigation is not yet completed. I will let you know immediately. Call to the post office every day. Hold yourself ready. Tell 'Libert' that if he does not send me money I'm going to name him. Tell cousin Baron that if he doesn't send me anything, I'll have him arrested right away. Reply soon.'

Obviously, Collevaert did not reply. A second missive, more urgent and still more pathetic arrived at the rue des Archives on 30 January 1904. Ferrand got wind of something awry. But he did not yet suspect the extent of cousin Baron's betrayal nor of the treachery of his former cellmate. 'Seek out Libert. Tell him to waste no time in getting away if there is still time. Let him change his name. Let him get away quickly. Somebody has given him away. His name and address are known. Go see cousin Baron. You will be well received now, I believe. (Ferrand had just generously absolved Gabrielle of all suspicion..) Go see him. Tell him to write to me in invisible ink. If you can send me a few pence, that would please me. Also, tell my hunting friend to change his name. They are after him too. Yours for life.'

These were the final flutterings of a moth around the light which burns it. Some days later, Ferrand was brought face to face with Gabrielle. His head began to spin. He could never have imagined these depths of ignominy in one whom he had picked up half-perished of hunger from the rue de le Clef. He wanted to strangle her there and then. It took four gendarmes to subdue him. But the damage was done. Thereafter, Ferrand modelled his attitude on Jacob's: he claimed credit for every offence, possible and impossible alike and denied that the other had had any part in them.

It took Monsieur Atté nearly two years to find a way out of the labyrinth through which he was groping his way. Thousands of searches, checks, arrests, confrontations and inquiries took place throughout France on his orders: he was never able to discover anything beyond what his three snitches had revealed to him: he was never able to uncover one accomplice other than those they had named to him. Unable quite to trace their outline, he was however able to sense the vast ramifications which Jacob had woven: 'This endeavour testifies to a dogged enthusiasm,' he wrote after putting the finishing touches to the 161 pages of the dossier, 'represents a considerable amount of work and *yet is scarcely a crack in a formidable organisation of lawbreakers the commanders of which have not been unmasked and whose headquarters has yet to be ferreted out.*'

These words were not uttered in public during the Amiens trial, lest public opinion be alarmed. In a way they were to be right: with Jacob out of the way, the organisation he had built up would be decapitated. However, what were these 'commanders' and 'headquarters' that Monsieur Atté chose to refer to?

Perhaps the magistrate suspected a Europe-wide stirring of 'uncontrollable forces'? In which case he was right. The social structures woven by the bourgeoisie, the great beneficiary of the 'industrial revolution', were being buffeted everywhere by a sort of backlash, called into question by workers resolved to catch up again with a tide of history of which they had been the dupes. Keen to rediscover for their own benefit some *historical meaning* and greedy for the short-circuiting of their backwardness through a *social revolution*. Very forms of State and modes of government were being challenged. France, England, Germany, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands snatched some temporary respite from the affliction by shipping their youth to the far side of the world to do battle with the Arab and the Black or Yellow peril. Already an alternative solution—the Great War with its appetite for cannon-fodder—was under consideration: and the artfully maintained tension between the Kaiser and the Third Republic was beginning to fan patriotic feelings to a white-heat, thereby distracting attention away from real problems. But the Tsar, so joyously

feted by the mob, so recently received with so much pomp in Paris and in whose honour the saver was ruining himself on Russian loans, Nicholas II was beginning to feel his empire rock beneath his feet. The abortive revolution of 1905 was to erupt while Jacob's trial was in progress, raising tremendous hopes among all the French comrades. As far back as 1903 the first ripples of the crisis had made themselves felt. Large numbers of Russian émigrés were stalking the streets of Paris, London and Brussels. For want of more detailed intelligence, the guardians of law and order willingly imagined a Machiavellian web covering the whole of Europe—a web of which Jacob would have been one manifestation. It was quite a compliment to the organising ability of the revolutionaries of the day...

However, the 'commanders' of whom Monsieur Atté spoke may have had a more substantial existence.

Remember the contacts established between Freemasons and anarchists at the time of the Dreyfus Affair. Sébastien Faure, Laurent Tailhade, Armand Charpentier and Gustave Hervé, to name but a few, had without any doubt been initiated. On the other side several lodges of the Grand Orient had moved *leftwards*. A number of masons had been seduced by libertarian ideas. Now:

1. Jacob had entered the fray shortly after the headiest days of the Affair.
2. He saw Sébastien Faure, at least, very frequently.
3. In the 1902 elections, the moderate republican wing of the Grand Orient had scored a success. Emile Loubet, President of the Republic since 1899, had been joined by, among others, Combes who had been appointed premier, Chaumié at the Education Ministry, Peletan at the Navy ministry, Léon Bourgeois, speaker of the House. All of these were *brethern*. Parallel with this there began a clampdown on initiates who were unduly 'leftist'. Indeed why encourage revolutionary agitation when one had just come to power by legal means and when one could reckon on improving society thanks to *reforms*? Thus the more hot-headed were 'stood down': and the more unruly lodges vanished.
4. At the same time (late 1902–1903) discord was on the increase in libertarian circles: Jacob moved from indignation to loss of heart—only to let himself be caught stupidly in the end, as if he no longer had any faith in anything at all.
5. Jacob, whenever he had letters to pass to ministers or high officials some years later<sup>19</sup> was to follow his signature with three quite distinct dots in the form of a triangle.

#### Bluff or reality?

These various coincidences are in any case worthy of note. Jacob had contacts in certain lodges of the *Grand Orient* which was then extremely powerful. Maybe those contacts were more important than they have been believed to be. What was the extent of the conspiracy? Was it envisaged

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<sup>19</sup> When drafting official correspondence of this sort, Jacob systematically used to follow his signature with three dots in triangle formation. About fifteen letters testify to this. Was this supposed to impress those to whom he was writing? Was he really a Freemason? In which case, how long had he been one? Is this confirmation of the hypothesis of an embryonic anarchist-masonic conspiracy noised around 1900-1902? Were lodges reformed in the penal settlements? That too is plausible for several supervisors, especially a certain Francheschi among them, were registered members of the Grand Orient. Unfortunately, the records of the rue Cadet vanished during the second world war and so it is hard to clear up this point.

in terms of a simple eventuality in the event of a reactionary coup d'état? Did it spread, albeit it within a short space of time, in a coordinated way? In any event it is certain that it did exist, in the planning stages anyway, among certain individuals and maybe the coming to power of 'little father Combes' rescued the Third Republic from a wave of social upheavals.

Whatever these political considerations may amount to, the judgement passed on Alexandre by the magistrates who dealt with him was not any the more clement for them. The accused had made his stand in the context of ordinary crime: and he was firmly kept to that. He had stolen, fired on policemen: he was a criminal.

'Jacob is, in the fullest sense of the word, a thief by profession,' one of them wrote. 'He organises excursions which he leads with infinite application and caution. He inspires confidence in his confederates. He spares nothing in the achieving of a sizeable and speedy haul, performing all the tasks entrusted to him to the best of his ability (...)

'Jacob has seen fit to boast of the 150 robberies in which he has been involved throughout the Republic and beyond. He affects to claim that they were inspired by some political idea and under questioning in Abbeville he struck an apostolic pose. *He is nothing more than an idle lawbreaker, a braggart.*

*'An incorrigible thief, prisoner beyond reforming, prompted by the most despicable mentality, he does appear in any respect to be susceptible to amendment of his ways nor deserving of clemency in the future.'*

Society's revenge was beginning.

The committal proceedings were completed in the last weeks of 1904. The accused were then removed to the Bicêtre prison in Amiens and the trial began.

From the outset, Jacob replied to all questioning with unbounded insolence. 'His attitude at the hearing has been absolutely indescribable,' the magistrates were to conclude as one. 'Jacob is a truly weird individual,' wrote the special correspondent from *L'Aurore*, 'His gaunt face reflects both hatred and gentleness. Whenever he addresses the court president or the prosecutor-general his muscles tense and his eyes, two great black eyes set deep in their sockets, flash wildly. On the other hand, whenever he tosses a joke the way of witnesses, or when he good-humouredly addresses his devoted counsel, Maître Justal, he becomes the very soul of goodness. His is an enigmatic and disturbing face, reflecting the most contradictory feelings one after another.'

'His attitude to the public is extraordinary,' *L'Illustration* takes up the story. 'He rails, he splutters at his victims whose wealth, he says, is a standing insult to the poor. The court president cannot restrain him. He is a type out of the ordinary, a dangerous lawbreaker but an object of curiosity. He makes ironic comments, jokes, sometimes none too foolishly, and displays cynicism and never short for an answer, perfectly indifferent, it would seem to be the consequence of his actions.' At the slightest opportunity he comes out with diatribes which he has rehearsed. Diatribes on the subject of the nobility, justice, rentiers, the clergy. On the army: 'We no longer make war on the infidels. *We civilise our insurgents.* Men ought not to kill each other. If I have chosen the military as my enemies, it is because I look upon them as murderers.'

Don Quixote in search of a dream of a better world, he tilted at every windmill. Ferrand, Bour, Pélissard and Bonnefoy in their turn stood up to read out their declarations of war. No longer was it a trial: it had become a socialist tirade.

Witness followed upon witness. Alexandre threw them with wisecracks, reflections and sarcastic remarks. A firework display of repartee. The public, though comprised in its majority of local notables screened before admission, could not help but laugh.

A sacristan arrived to testify: Wehekind asked him to swear the oath: 'So you think he might tell lies?—said Jacob.

Wehekind made some reference to the 'Jacob women'.

'Wouldn't you think I kept a harem?' he complained.

Wehekind accused Clarenson of being crazy only when it suited him.

'Oh, Monsieur le Président! There are madmen even among investigating magistrates!' he sneered.

Wehekind attempted to explain the *modus operandi* of one burglary:

'Monsieur le Président, you are mistaken', he interrupted. 'To dispatch folk to the penal settlement or the scaffold you are qualified, that I do not dispute. But in housebreaking matters you have no expertise. You will not teach me in my trade.'

When, during the third session, he read out his thief's creed in a warm and serious voice for upwards of half an hour, the public were dumbfounded. The press could not get over it. 'It is not society, represented by the magistrates and jurors, which sits in judgement on Jacob the chief of thieves,' said *L'Aurore*, 'it is Jacob the chief of thieves who puts society on trial. In truth, he runs the show. He is always on stage. Always ready with some retort. He provides questions and answers as required. He presides! He judges!'

In the big circulation newspapers the extent of his comments was played down. But in Amiens *Germinal* was on sale everywhere. In the shop of Lemaire the cobbler they were not idle. All night long they were running off leaflets carrying Alexandre's pronouncements of the day before and by daybreak there these were being distributed.

The popularity of the Thief grew. Women were curious about him. He was twenty five years old. He had fire. He disturbed them. The menfolk argued about him bitterly. He was the sole topic of conversation in the whole of France, and abroad too no doubt. One could not always follow his logic—but his boldness won him friends. 'One is much taken by such a man,' exclaimed *Le Libéraire*, 'After two deadly years of incarceration, alone between two walls at night, a being possessed of such a constant fund of energy, such lucidity of mind, is of a nature very out of the ordinary. They have tried to portray him as both enlightened braggart and a self-centred, bloodthirsty thug. His forthright declarations, his whole life, his kind, calm smile when his eyes light on something other than a manifestation of authority, are the roundest refutations of that...'

Every morning, as the Black Marias arrived, a tighter, friendlier throng pressed forward as the accused were led into the court building, singing the *Internationale* or the *Carmagnole*. Yes the public was beginning to grasp the import of his activities. That would have required the righter of wrongs to become victim. While he evaded the police, he had inspired fear. Shackled, they applauded him.

However, reports from the narks who had come from Paris took an alarming turn. Something was being hatched in the offices. The ringleaders sought to carry the populace with them. Then again, at the close of the fourth session, hadn't Jacob been seen to exchange knowing looks with several suspicious-looking persons who had managed to wrangle their way into court?

Indeed, Malato, Souvarine, Pacaud and Ouin were on the alert. They had managed to have a small sachet of pepper passed to Alexandre. And where, when and how would he put it into use? He was under watch day and night. The light was always on in his cell and the judas-hole was always open. The *chasseurs* of his escort were too numerous. Gendarmes were everywhere and dogged his every step. What matter! Just then Jacob reckoned that he had accomplished his mission. He had done all he could for Marie and for Rose and for his co-accused—as well as for

his unknown confederates. The terms of the dilemma had changed: no longer was it them or him, now it was liberty or death.

‘It’s on for tomorrow or the day after,’ Malato announced at last on 13 March on the premises of *Germinal*. ‘He will try to make his break from the room adjoining the courtroom during a recess. He will go to the toilets, slip out of his chains, jump into the Palace courtyard through a skylight, climb a stairway and hurl himself through a window. We’ll be waiting there with a car. There is a one in ten chance that he will make it.’

There was a pregnant silence.

‘This morning the jurors received a threatening letter,’ boomed Souvarine. ‘That’ll always give them a little pause for thought.’

That very evening, as the hearing concluded at 5.00 pm., a considerable and enthusiastic crowd awaited Jacob in the rue Victor-Hugo. As the Black Marias appeared a rumble grew: ‘Long live Jacob! Long live Anarchy!’ A procession formed up and moved off towards the place Saint-Denis. The troops strode forward. The crowd dithered and then melted away. The troops charged. Shouts went up to the right and left: ‘Death to the coppers! Long live Anarchy! Long live Jacob!’

Monsieur Lépine’s informers had their eyes peeled. One of them leapt on Jules Lemaire. A fine young fellow who had come from Ailly-sur-Somme to get a look at Jacob made to intervene. He too was bundled away. As was one Gabrielle Mariette who was indicted for ‘insulting a policeman’, along with a dozen others—including a cab driver who had been shouting his head off from his seat.

Monsieur Wehekind learned of this budding riot. Enough is enough. The retorts and declarations by the chief accused, the letter threatening jurors with death—these marches: justice was being made a mockery of. The situation had to be taken in hand.

The next morning, Tuesday 14 March, as soon as proceedings opened there was an incident. The occasion was supplied by the deposition of Devaine, the cafe owner from the rue de Vouille below Ferré’s place, at whose home the gang had so often got together. Devaine recognised Rose among the accused.

‘She was even known as ‘the marquise’ on account of her snooty air,’ he said.

Rose reddened with anger.

‘I’ve never had the airs of a marquise!’ she burst out. ‘I don’t know what this gentleman means.’ The president who had merely been waiting for some excuse, let himself go.

‘And which one of the... accused ventures to address questions directly to the witness?’

‘It is I,’ said Rose.

‘Stand up.’

‘I ask, rather, that I may be allowed to sit. I am ill.’

‘You are always ill when you shouldn’t be.’ That’s taking things a little far. Sautarel’s counsel, Maître Lagasse intervened:

‘Among the accused there are some people who are afflicted with an illness. The illness of innocence. There they are!...’

‘Well, Maître Lagasse, you can say that in your argument!’ replied the president.

‘I rather think that I will be able to say so every time that you are willing to give me the floor to defend my client,’ answered the lawyer.

‘If you think you’re going to have the last word over me, you are mistaken!’

‘The defence is entitled to some rights.’



The tone escalated. Maître Fabiani, Ferré's defence counsel, an Amiens lawyer unlike Maître Lagasse who was from the Paris bar, piped up in turn with his objections. Since the start of the trial, the lawyers from Paris had not been too warmly welcomed by president Wehekind who had not ceased to goad them.

'You are an admirable fellow!' the president told Fabiani. 'I'll grant you permission to speak every time you ask it of me. The members of the Paris bar are not well-mannered and I have no reason to be pleased with them.'

Lagasse exploded:

'In the 18 years that I have been a lawyer no such reflection has ever been cast on me,' he thundered. 'I will not tolerate it.'

'You will listen to what I have to tell you.'

'Never have I seen a president as disrespectful as you of the defence!'

'I accord respect to those who merit it.'

'Since we do not merit your respect, we shall withdraw.' Whereupon Maîtres André Hesse, Bergougnhioux de Wailly, Silvy, Grad, Lévy-Oulmann, Lafont and Justal did indeed trot out behind him<sup>20</sup>.

At this Jacob sprang to his feet:

'Since we no longer have counsel we cannot stay here,' he roared.

At a signal from him, the 26 accused stood up and vied with each other, crying: 'Long live anarchy! Stinking president! Murderer! Pack of bandits! It is just beautiful, this justice of yours. It's a setup! Bandits! Bandits!'

They struck up the *Internationale*. Only with great difficulty were the gendarmes able to restrain them. In the courtroom, the elegant ladies who had come to thrill at the sight of the robber and laugh at his flippancy, seeing the comedy now turn into a drama, tiptoed away. The tumult was indescribable. Finally the ringing tones of the advocate-general made themselves heard.

'In application of the law, I demand removal of the accused!'

To which the latter replied: 'Bravo! Bravo! Hurrah!'

The president declared the hearing in recess, ordering the removal of Jacob and also of Ferré, Pélassard, Bour, Sautarel, Clarenson, Baudy, Vaillant and Apport.

A recess was agreed upon. The nine accused, by now beside themselves, were hauled from their benches and dragged into the Black Marias. Maîtres Justal and Hesse, who had not been directly involved in the incident attempted to conciliate with the president. The latter refused to open his door to them. They dispatched a telegram to the Lord Chancellor: to no avail. The persons removed were not to be let into the hearing room for the rest of the proceedings. No request for readmission was to be heeded. Only an appeal to the Court of Cassation could alter the situation. But, even supposing that it was not turned down, the trial would have had time aplenty to finish in.

'The essential point for us is to see an end of this affair,' the president commented when the hearing resumed.

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<sup>20</sup> Aside from Maître Justal (defending Jacob and Marie Jacob), Lagasse (defending Pélassard) Fabiani, (Ferré), and Maître Catoire acting as defence counsel for Bour; Maître Pecquet acted for Pélassard; Maître Roux for Bonnefoy; Maître Philippe for Rose; Maître Silvy for Madame Ferré (Angèle); Maître Lafont for Ader; Maître Bergougnhioux for Clarenson and Brunus; Maître Bompard for Léontine-Alice; Maître Grad for Baudy and Blondel; Maître Caumartin for Ferrand and Vaillant; Maître Jeunel for Westermann and Châlus; Maître Lévy-Oulmann for Augain; Maître Desavoye for Apport; Maître Derbos for Charles and Maître Hesse for Limonnier.

To put it another way: to ensure that the court no longer be openly held up to derision.

For Alexandre, this was a catastrophe. This he had not anticipated. The president had turned his own trap against him. The uproar which he had contrived had backfired on him. The escape plan was shelved for good. He was locked up in his cell, no more to leave it.

The car which had been waiting for him along the walls of the Palace moved off, dejectedly. At *Germinal*, they were devastated, sickened, upset, seething and frustrated. What could they do? Not a thing. Capitalise on the incident to blow it up into a scandal. Expose the attitude of the wicked judges who, whenever an accused annoys them by speaking the truth to them, quite simply ban him from being present at his own trial.

As far as Souvarine was concerned there were no grounds for further hesitation: the people, at last coming around to their side, expected action. They had to act immediately. Butcher at least one or two jurors right away. Getting at the magistrates was impossible: they had a police guard. They argued the point. Some voices endorsed the Russian émigré's views.

'But,' the others said, 'that will backfire on us: at present, they love us but they'd come to hate us again. And what of our comrades who will be treated as hostages and sentenced to death? We don't want that.'

Wiser counsels prevailed. They came to a compromise: a clear and firm warning to be issued to the jurors. It being well understood that there would be no going back on it, if the necessity arose. They swore on it. They set about drafting a second threatening letter.

*Along with professional magistrates, you are called upon to sit in judgement of Jacob and his comrades. Reflect upon the situation in which you find yourselves. Are you going to let yourselves be swayed by the vengeful talk of the judges and prosecutors with an eye to certain promotion in the wake of their bill of changes?*

*Don't believe that if you return a harsh verdict you are going to be able to return to your pleasures in the bosom of your family. Above all do not believe that your justice has in its clutches all the members of that phalanx of rebels who are pledged to annihilate property rights. Know that we are there, monitoring your movements, sounding out your intentions and that if you should dare to strike out, we will break you.*

*The contest is not an equal one. You have the law and might on your side. We have guile on ours. We will close our hearts to pity. We will strike at you personally through your wives and your children. We shall shrink from no means: explosives or revolvers. And do not believe in idle threats. Remember president of Assizes Benoit, or prosecutor Bulot who sent Ravachol to his death, or the Grand Duke Sergei and other officials who did not believe in the vengeance of revolvers.*

*Dare strike without pity at our friends and we too shall strike without pity at you. Depend upon our reprisals: and may... this deadly vision of your fate be often in your mind when the moment of judgement comes.*

*You have been warned.*

*Watch out.*

*Some friends of Jacob's.*

The jurors did watch out. Were they more sensible to this most unengaging missive than to Maître Justal's plea on Jacob's behalf? 'A heart violent yet tender, a nature at once compassionate

and ferocious... His sometimes inappropriate attitude... Yet he has struck me as the very incarnation of the urge to goodness far, far from pursuing the aim of a life of luxury, to him thieving means taking wealth away from the rich to give to the poor. He regards himself primarily as a righter of wrongs... In every age in history such starry-eyed types have passed through society in the quest for a yearned-for ideal, long before anarchy established its teaching... Deep down in these creatures is a faith that we cannot grasp... He never sought to kill... You, Monsieur le procureur, have asked for his head... Jacob offers that head in a letter which he has just sent me. But then who would dare take it?’

Alexandre’s head was saved.

On 22 March, a Wednesday, after the final arguments and a reading of the 696 questions which he had had to answer, the jury withdrew to consider its verdict. It took them 11 hours. Meals had to be laid on for them in the jury-room. ‘The stewarding was as strict as could be,’ wrote the correspondent of *Le Petit Parisien*, and the palace of justice was deserted. Only in the evening was the public admitted. Once the doors were opened, the room was soon, literally, invaded.

The ten accused who had been barred from the court were not brought back into the courtroom. It was exactly 9.30 when the hearing resumed and the chairman of the jury rose to speak.

The verdict was as follows:

Jacob and his pupil Bour was sentenced to hard labour for life.

These were acquitted: Alcide Ader, the man who used to run away from burglaries (the prosecutor commented: ‘He was not, according to his co-defendants, an intrepid thief. But he is nonetheless a rather dishonest, quite unscrupulous fellow’); Georges Apport, the assistant gold smelter (comment: ‘His acquittal is to be regretted’); Emile Augain and Westermann, Ferré’s two latest recruits (of Augain the prosecution had said: ‘His acquittal is to be regretted because he is of a nature to add to the boldness of one of the most dangerous of thieves’); Chalus, the brothel-keeper (‘the testimony of a prostitute alone was not enough to convict even a brothel-keeper’); Limonniere, the occasional go-between of Jacob and his smelters: plus Léontine Tissandier alias Alice Vincent, Bour’s former mistress and the stool-pigeon—naturally.

The remainder got heavy sentences: Ferrand, Jacob’s right hand man, got 20 years of penal servitude; Pélassard, subject to a residence ban, and Bonnefoy, the adventurer located in Djibouti, got 8 years’ hard labour, which, as *Germinal* was to point out, was tantamount to a life sentence since anything more than a 7-year term in a penal colony carried the obligation of spending the rest of one’s days in Guyana; half-crazy Clarenson got 5 years’ hard labour; the intellectual Sautarel got 5 also, a heavy sentence; Ferré, the mosaic-worker and concierge from the rue Labrouste, was put away for ten years.

Vaillant, Ferrand’s assistant, got a 10 year prison term which did not matter much to him since the sentence was to run concurrently with the 10 years in a penal colony with which he had just been ‘presented’ by the Nièvre assizes on 3 August 1903; Baudy the Loser got 10 years, plus banishment to Guyana for life. Charles, the tool-repairer, got 5 years and banishment; the smelter Brunus got 5 years as did Blondel, the nancy-boy of Ferrand—and Rose.

Marie, as Ferré’s wife, was rewarded with 5 years’ imprisonment.

‘The reading of the verdict proceeded without incident. The court rose at 10.30.’

An enormous crowd was massed in front of the palace. Very heated arguments were raging. On two or three occasions these came to blows. And the belligerents had to be separated. Most had no objection to the conviction of Jacob and Ferrand: they had gambled and lost and that

was that. On the other hand, the sentences passed on certain of their confederates, like Sautarel, Marie or Rose were regarded as disproportionate.

All of a sudden, the mounted *chasseurs* emerged from barracks. They were joined by three troops of infantry, gendarmes and a horde of police. They charged rather brutally and managed to drive the crowd back ten metres. The Black Marias moved off. Actual screams, a thousand voices shouting 'Long live Jacob! Long live anarchy!' rang out on every side. Inspector Jénnot surveyed the scene. 'Lepine's grasses' spied on the clusters of people. They surprised some militants in the act of handing out leaflets, and seized them. It was not an incendiary summons as they had feared, but a poem by Péliissard entitled *Conseils à un pègre* (Advice to a Crook) and it ended like this:

'Respect the prole, rob the rich man  
Like a true knight of the crowbar.  
Strip the bourgeois, that cynical thief:  
There in a few words in the indispensable rule  
By which you must live as a reasonable *crook*.'

Once again, a demonstration was organised. A compact crowd of a thousand people came down on the rue des Trois-Cailloux singing the *Internationale* 'under the gaze of powerless sergeants'. Cries of 'Long live Jacob!' rose past the façades to the closed shutters above. In the rue de la Hotoie, two officers were encountered and jeered at some length.

A spontaneous rally was held outside the premises of *Germinal*. Inside the shop, the forms of action to be planned from now on were being debated.

In his cell, Alexandre Marius was sleeping peacefully, awaiting transfer to Orléans where a further trial for the attempted murder of constable Couillant lay ahead of him.

#### 'A JUDICIAL CRIME

*The hypocritical, cowardly verdict in the Jacob trial runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds. But there is a limit to everything, even to infamy. Apropos of Sautarel even Le Progrès de la Somme admitted: What then is the cause of this implacable hate-filled severity towards this accused? The truth? The truth is that Sautarel was convicted and treated harshly not because the jurors believed him to be guilty for there is nothing to show that he was, but because he proclaimed himself an anarchist. Sautarel was punished for a crime of opinion. He was tried for his beliefs. He was sent to the penal colony because he is an anarchist. That is what is going to revive a feeling of injustice.*

*'The seeds that you have sown  
O bourgeois, will sprout from the earth.  
Hatred, that evil bloom  
Thrives and grows in our entrails.  
It will sprout as much as it can!  
Steady boys! It is Germinal  
That will make the seed fruitful!'*

*What can one say of the conviction of Madame Jacob? What can anyone say of your witnesses, a DEAD WHORE (Gabrielle) and a CRAZED ALCOHOLIC (Colevaert, who in point of fact had meanwhile been committed to an asylum)?*

*Even the reformist Ligue des droits de l'homme protests at this verdict. Even L'Avant-Garde, for all its conservatism; even Le cri du Peuple, whose editor-in-chief, Rodrigues nonetheless argues that it would be criminal folly to resort to the 'violent methods of our Russian comrades' in the country where there is 'FREEDOM OF OPINION AND THOUGHT'—they have all made a stand against this iniquity.*

*It spells the return of the Inquisition and a reversion to human sacrifice. This is what right-thinking folk describe as a miscarriage of justice. More than one Sautarel, among others, has been the victim of vengeance. In him they had struck at the writer, the thinker, the anarchist, the very idea of anarchism. It's a frame-up!*

*Germinal*, 9 April 1905.<sup>21</sup>

Jacob's transfer took place on 30 March. Between prisons he described it to his mother: 'Though it was no pleasure trip, my journey was not without its agreeable side. As you must imagine, I was the focus of public curiosity. At each halt, at every station between Amiens and Liancourt, a crowd of travellers massed about the carriage, inquisitive and, I have to add, well-disposed also. Some workmen even offered me their modest lunches. Such marks of friendliness have an eloquence of their own. The people are good, whatever one may say. This was not the delirious, drink-inflamed mob which screamed senseless, savage cries in Abbeville, but enlightened folk, *enlightened further by the debates at the assize court.*'

So his sacrifice had not been in vain: through him, people were looking at anarchy with a fresh eye. His morale had improved: 'The yard where I exercise could be mistaken for one of the animal compounds in the Jardin des Plantes. It is funny. And then I see lots of lovely things: stones, earth, vegetables and finally some fruit trees so spindly as to move one to pity. I have the same feeling for four or five little plants whose species and genus I do not know and which eke out a bare existence beneath a protective glass cloche. I can see what they lack: a few years hard labour would put them right. They would benefit from a more clement temperature. But then not everyone who wants to get to go to the penal colony... I think of the disasters of all sorts which threaten mortals living at liberty while I, a prisoner, am happy. I eat, drink... sleep... breathe and reflect... what more could I wish for? It gives one a better understanding of the Capuchins' calling... The world is a rag-bag of dupes and rogues or, to borrow an analogy more appropriate to our situation, of hunters and rabbits. Now, for the time being, we are the rabbits and there is nothing for it but for us to contrive that we are not juggled... As in the past, I recommend you to remain steadfast and above it all. Seek neither pardon nor parole. Having done nothing you have nothing to plead for. Likewise, once released, I do not advise you to seek a review of your sentence: would such a review give you back the years of freedom that society has spirited away from you?'

However, along with nine of those accused in the Amiens trial who had some notion so to do, or for whom it was a possibility, Marie had appealed to the court of cassation. It was heard on 5 June. A fresh trial was begun for them in Laon before the Aisne department assizes on 26 September.

There Marie was acquitted on 1 October 1905. Alexandre was overwhelmed with happiness for her.

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<sup>21</sup> *Germinal* was to survive the trial by two years, with the same verve and violence as ever.

Rose was less fortunate: her five-year term was confirmed. By the time she emerged from prison in 1908 at the age of 43 she would be a woman old before her time. Alexandre was to write to her now and then, but after that...

Two others were acquitted: Brunus, the smelter, who was to go back to his foundry: and Sautarel was to go on living an active militant life in Perpignan right into the interwar years. As for the fate of the others, here they are—insofar as it has been possible to discover them.

The ten years imprisonment awarded to Baudy, that unluckily, romantic gambler who had written such moving ‘confessions’, were cut down to seven. But the banishment order stood: ‘A hardened lawbreaker, whom it is hard to imagine amending his ways. He was not too severely dealt with in Laon. In the interests of society it is important that the banishment order passed on him be carried into effect.’ Banishment, of course, meant removal to Guyanne.<sup>22</sup>

He would be allocated a plot of earth to clear near Cayenne and there he would be entitled to perish of hunger beneath the blazing sun among the mosquitoes. Such was the lot of the banished, who were in theory free to do as they pleased: their lot was no more to be envied than the lot of the convicts. And so he was presented with this poisoned gift.

Bonnefoy, the adventurer, husband of Marcelle the singer was, it seems, more fortunate: his eight years’ hard labour were cut to 7 years’ imprisonment, plus a ten year residence ban. Nonetheless the court’s comment on him was unsettling: ‘In determining whether or not he should serve the full term of his sentence his attitude in prison should be a consideration. It would be desirable that some work be found for him in the colonies where he himself had intended to go at the time of arrest.’ What colonies? All trace of him has been lost.

Angele, the concierge, Ferré’s wife: her five-year term was reduced to three at Leon: thus, taking into consideration the time she had spent in custody she had only a few months left to serve. Released in 1907 she settled in Narbonne where her husband was to join her two years later thanks to good behaviour in prison, to the fact that she had no prior convictions—and to their two children.

Vaillant, Ferrand’s lieutenant: his ten year prison term was commuted to six but the banishment order stood. Banishment to Cayenne.

Blondel, Ferrand’s fresh-faced assistant: the lawyer who had been allocated to him at the Amiens trial (Maître Grad) coldly abandoned him as soon as his five year term of imprisonment had been passed. So much so that by the time he discovered that he could appeal to the court of cassation, the regulation period of eligibility had passed. So he served his sentence and went back to Lyons where he resumed his old trade as a printer.

Bour, the favourite pupil: any appeal was pointless in his case. He was to become yet another convict among the many and was to die over there.

Charles, the tool-repairer: apparently content with his five-year jail term. He submitted no appeal either. He served his time in the prison in Melun where he was well known. The senator for Loir-et-Cher, where his ailing father and crippled mother lived, intervened on his behalf. Then so did the president of the Council General of the Cher department, Tassin, and deputy Ragot. In the end he was granted a pardon. He was released in 1907 and took up his trade as a locksmith again.

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Banishment’ (*la relegation*) consisted of deportation, in perpetuity principally to the territory of French colonies or possessions, for common law convicts regarded as incorrigible by reason of the frequency of their breaches of the law.

Clarensen, the sham-real madman, submitted an appeal which brought him before the Oise assizes on 19 June 1906: his term of imprisonment was cut to five years, plus banishment. 'The only witnesses were policemen' he was to write. He was sent to Beaulieu prison.

From then on, his life is like a story of a highly intelligent lunatic. His mother inundated the Lord Chancellor with petitions on behalf of her poor son... 'afflicted with a hereditary mental illness, a persecution mania and delusions of grandeur: 17 doctors specialising in mental illness have pronounced him mad. In Beaulieu his health deteriorated. He is spent. His brain is scrambled. He is a martyr. He lives on milk and eggs alone. He is afflicted by rheumatism. One arm is useless. The winter is going to be rough. His sentence will finish in May 1908. And afterwards will come the banishment... This final nightmare must be spared him: he will not return from it.'

But the courts were implacable: on 17 July 1908 Clarensen boarded a ship for Guyanne as part of a batch of people under banishment orders. On 3 November 1910 he was assigned as an individual to Saint-Jean-du-Maroni: which is to say that he was entitled to work a small plot of land, without surveillance, almost like a regular colonist. That was the last that was heard of Clarensen. He vanished, flew the coop: his comparative liberty enabled him to make good his 'escape', what all deportees dreamt of. He made his way back to Europe via Italy, but failed to locate Antoinette Bernard, the widow Amiglio, to whom he had written from prison... 'My poor beloved Vinette...' '...Your fat daddy...' 'He who lives only through you.' She was little inclined to see him again: he went back to his beloved green baize, was arrested in Monte Carlo, red-handed while cheating, was sentenced to three years in his absence by the Monaco court on 26 June 1912 and vanished once and for all into further adventures.

As for Pélissard, the one-time victim of a residence ban, sentenced to eight years' penal servitude, who had displayed... 'the attitude of a lawbreaker bereft of any sense of morality during the preliminary inquiry'... 'a hardened criminal not susceptible to amendment of his ways' and a staunch anarchist militant to boot, he was to stay on Devil's Island, a rebel as ever. Number 34441 (as he was to be designated from then on), an insubordinate sort, 'inclined to anarchist views', he was to die in the hell that was Guyane after many a long day in the cells.

As was Ferrand too.

It is beyond doubt that, in most of these cases, the 'libertarian' movement's lack of backbone did much to add to the burden of the sentences passed on certain of the *Night Workers*.

*Jacob to Marie,*

*For my part, I have scarcely a care. Upset myself because I am going to the penal colony? Never! It is fine for upright folk to weep and suffer in this vale of tears. They are sure to enjoy every happiness in the world to come. But I, poor incorrigible bandit as I am, resigned to serving as anthracite in the stove of Lord Lucifer's boiler, I do what I can to enjoy the pleasures of this squalid world insofar as my resources allow. For the moment, those pleasures consist of making fun of it all, showing myself to be above events, not letting myself be guided by them, but seeking to turn them to my advantage...*

*I am anxious to be handed over so that I can drink in all those tropical smells, eat coconuts, mangos, and bananas and... salt pork. And to see at last the penal settlement with its grandeurs, passions, squalor, cowardice and revolts. I will see old acquaintances there: I will find Friends there. I am persuaded that they already know of my circumstances and are expecting me. How fortunate to find friendship even in the penal colony! How many there who cannot find it anywhere!...*

On 24 July 1905, the Orléans Assizes, presided over by Monsieur Escoffier sentenced Alexandre to twenty years' penal servitude for... 'aggravated robberies and assault on police'. It was a mere formality since Alexandre was in any case being shipped off to Cayenne with no hope of returning. The whole case had been argued and sentence pronounced in a single sitting.

Alexandre seized the chance to launch into his usual mockery of society. He also attempted to escape: but he had cased the premises carelessly and, after having jumped from a skylight, wound up between two gendarmes again.

Exactly 9 days before, 15 had seen the appearance of *Je sais tout* the monthly magazine launched by the publisher Pierre Lafitte the previous February: it carried the first instalment of the biography of Arsen Lupin: 'The arrest of Arsen Lupin'. But whereas Maurice Leblanc's hero was preparing to become more and more of the *gentleman* and less of the *burglar*, before launching into nationalism, moralism and conservatism as his adventures followed one upon another, Jacob was donning the brown fustian, galoshes, shirt, cotton tunic and cap of the convict. Already, beneath the shaved head another person was discernable... that of Vautrin, the convict chief, known as *Trompe-la-mort*. (Death-Dodger).

From then on, only one hope kept him going: the hope of 'escape'. And there was only one form of sustenance: letters from his mother, hundreds of missives which sometimes reached their destination only months late. A correspondence of the heart that would be kept up for twenty three years, between what he called his 'very good lady' and convict 34477.

'In the event of death,' the prison regulations specify, 'the registration number is the only inscription to appear on the wooden cross in the cemetery. This number is worn on constant display on the left arm.'



# A Quarter of a Century on Devil's Island

## I

'In November 1905 with an escort of warders from Orleans prison, Alexandre was locked up in a sealed carriage that was hitched up to the Paris train. There he was joined by 18 other candidates for penal servitude in the colonies before taking a second train for La Rochelle. It was raining. In the station, it was chilly. There the gendarmerie, Garde Mobile and local police were waiting for them. Along the quai Valin, the quai Duperré and the very bourgeois rue du Palais, the funereal procession wended its way on foot towards the prison which lay right in the heart of the city. Rows of police blocked off the traffic at each intersection. A one-legged prisoner, murderer of a rentier lady, was hard pressed to keep abreast. Supporting him with one arm, Alexandre helped him keep in step. The frightened, derisive or lascivious eyes of housewives, young girls and men of elegance watched the human livestock shuffle towards the anteroom of death.

A crust of bread, a ladle-full of clear soup, a night spent shivering, shackled to a plank-bed and then off again the next day at daybreak, the cortege swelled by a further hundred convicts, as far as the gangway of the Ile de Ré ship, the Coligny, a paddle-steamer. They were mustered on deck along with a herd of pigs and a handful of horses. Once beyond the crenellated towers of Saint-Nicolas and La Chaîne, the sea was rough. A slight swell swept over the deck. Within moments, all of the passengers were drenched. Several were sick. The joking had stopped. Muscles tensed. Alexandre started coughing.

The crossing to Saint-Martin-de-Ré took an hour and a half. A cordon of gendarmes and Senegalese fusiliers with rifles loaded led them away towards the ancient citadel of Vauban where, according to tradition, convicts were mustered, sorted and classified prior to shipment to Guyane, which shipments took place twice a year, in July and December. Between 1873 and 1936, 50,000 human beings passed that way.

In the great rectangular courtyard, they were all allocated to their huts.

All of a sudden, convict 34477 seemed to pose some sort of problem. The chief warder heatedly argued his case with two officers. All eyes seemed to be on Alexandre who stood as erect as he could. Putting a bold face on it. In reality he was trembling with fever.

In the end, he was dragged away from the others as far as the infirmary. The screw insulted him as coarsely as he could along the way. Alexandre did not bat an eyelid. He was shut up in a special cell.

Not that the Prison Administration had decided to take special care of his health. But his file bore the designation 'murder'. Whether the mistake was deliberate or not, it was to take 20 years before it was cleared up. On the buff cover to the file the public prosecutor had added in his own handwriting: 'Exceptionally dangerous bandit. To be kept under extraordinarily close surveillance! As a further precaution, the Interior Ministry had drafted a special memorandum about him: 'This anarchist of the worst sort is to be isolated from other convicts. Not to be released from confinement on any grounds.' So that was why Alexandre had come in for favoured treatment.

He was to be an outcast among the outcast: this guaranteed him prestige in the eyes of even the most diabolic brutes but that was something he would gladly have foregone even if, for the time being, this isolation spared him the necessity of mixing with them.

'One official visit to the Saint Martin-de-Ré muster-station,' wrote gendarmerie captain Pyguillem in the *Revue de la gendarmerie*<sup>1</sup>, 'is enough for one to be struck by the flawless behaviour of the convicts, the promptness with which they rise and undress, and the almost monkish silence which reigns in such places.'

This comment was assuredly a judicious one to make to visitors. Moreover, the captain goes on to offer his own explanation for it: 'Quite apart from the whole array of ordinary punishments, disciplinary stakes have been set up on several sites.' As its name implies, this apparatus consisted of an upright iron bar set in front of a wall. The victim was lined up with his back against the stake, his back kept arched by the rings riveting him to the wall at ankle and wrist. The stake pressed into his spine. Even the most pain-immuned criminal could not withstand an hour of such treatment. The bloody-minded might be left in that position all night. This practice is still followed up to this day, it is said, despite regulations, in some French prisons.

'Thanks to these fortunate preventive measures, discipline is generally good,' the good captain notes.

By night, though, and despite the rule of absolute silence, the men whisper in the huts. Sordid schemes were hatched. The most domineering imposed their will. The most depraved selected themselves a ... 'nancy boy'. It was futile for their chosen one to resist: he would be raped, beaten and killed if need be. The life of a convict is worthless: a murder earned a few month's imprisonment, sometimes only a few days for a first offence.

Alexandre was subjected to his first ordeals. Strip-searches. Even the inside of the mouth and rectum were examined. Then came the 'barber' and the issue of clothes. Next the organisation of the day. A half-hour's stroll in Indian file every morning and evening. There too there was a ban on talking as well as smoking, which bothered him scarcely at all. The bulk of the day between sun-up and sundown was given over to tedious chores: oakum-picking, making felt slippers, fishing nets, clothes pegs, wooden clogs, paper screens and paper bags.

'The standard regimen of meals seems adequate,' Pyguillem continues. 'It consists of 130 grammes of soup rolls, 700 grammes of mixed vegetables daily, with meat on Thursdays, Sundays and holidays.' In fact, the bread was mouldy and the beans full of weevils.

The first serious incident came a few days after Alexandre's arrival. Just as he was about to serve, the trusty in charge of ladling out the soup looked right into his eyes. Then he cleared his throat. A huge gob of spit landed right in his mess-tin. The fellow burst out laughing. As did the warder by his side. Alexandre clenched his teeth.

'Get a load of this wimp!' the two confederates sneered.

Fists clenched, Alexandre stood there motionless. The killing of a convict, especially one reputed to be dangerous as he was, would be too great scalp in the belt of these thugs. The hierarchy would probably reward them for it. His eyes did not waver. He would never forget that face. The trusties, the mould upon the rottenness of penal colony life are well known convicts whom the administration has appointed as auxiliary warders. Kapos. Arabs, most of them, avenging them-

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<sup>1</sup> In an article entitled 'The marshalling and embarkation of convicts destined for Guyane', and published as a pamphlet in 1936.

selves on the 'infidel' through the authority delegated to them. Or, as in this instance, white men of the jackal variety. Cowardly sadistic narks.

Irrked by their failure to provoke, the two soup-bearers moved on to the next cell, where a young fugitive from the disciplinary battalions posted in North Africa lay. The play was tried once more. But the young ingénu had not learned self-control. He flung his mess-tin into the face of the warder. Alexandre heard some muffled blows and raised voices. Followed by silence.

'The sick are tended with every care by a doctor attached to the staff,' the captain tells. However, a few pages further on, he notes: 'Generally health conditions are satisfactory: *one cannot but be startled by this, given the high percentage of lung diseases and afflictions of every sort.*'

One is less startled upon reading Doctor Rousseau's book *Un medecin au bagne*. Rousseau, about to become a friend to Jacob, in fact gave up counting the cases of terminal tuberculosis, typhoid sufferers or one-legged convicts which he encountered in Guyane. The fact is that most of the time the medical services at Saint Martin-de-Ré did not even bother to give those scheduled for deportation a checkup: and why would they since they were dealing with the dregs of society? So they made do with stamping their prison passes. Alexandre, for his part and despite his fever, never came within ten metres of the captain of colonial troops in charge of the infirmary.

Anyway, penal servitude was not devised to cure but to punish. Every year, the boat brought a fresh cargo of some 900 souls to Cayenne. Every year, 700 convicts perished. If one adds to these the escapees who perished while trying to get away, one arrives at a flawlessly effective extermination system that was no less hypocritical for all that, allowing the administration to keep the numbers of its charges for ever constant at about 6,000 men. Those are the figures of Monsieur Henri, colonial inspector. Doctor Rousseau had a further detail to add: in the penal colony the average life span of a young, sturdy individual, by reason of climate and food, was about five years. The convicts whom Alexandre had met up with years before aboard the *Ville-de-la Ciotat* were fortunate souls. Set alongside Cayenne, Nouméa was a paradise. Moreover, that was why deportation to the penal colonies was abolished: the taxpayers of the day protested at the 'squandering of their money'. So, rather than improve French prisons, penal servitude was made worse. Guyana today is the dry guillotine: the chopper has been dispensed with. But it is also a lingering agony in abjectness and disintegration, the rotting of body and soul. Guyane is a purulent abcess on the side of Latin America whose every diplomatic representative reiterates in vain to our ambassadors that Guyane is a disgrace to the land of the Rights of Man.

*Saint Martin-de Ré, December 1905.*

*Dear mum,*

*In the 32 months I have been in waiting, I have had time to train myself to be patient, and so I do not get bored. I let the Earth revolve and I take things as they come. Moreover, for the past few days, I have been on my own in a padded cell and am much better for it. I have told you lots of times, I missed my vocation. With my ultra-misanthropic tastes, I would have made a merry Capuchin. But enough of regrets! The only Capuchin feature I have about me is my clothing (the colouring, I mean) and soon, for want of a cross to bear, I'll be off to wield my pick. So it is written that I am to be a demolition expert even in these exotic surroundings! O destiny of destinies! What a blow you have dealt me!...*

On 22 December 1905, all newly clothed thanks to the colonial stores at Rochefort, kitted out with haversack, mess-tin, fork, spoon, beaker and regulation blankets, issued with his ration of

dark chocolate and cheese, Alexandre was led out to join the gathering being held in the great yard.

Since yesterday, there have been no more visits. Alexandre had been allowed to write only one letter to his mother—just one—along regulation lines so as to make it easier for the screw to read it. Marie had been informed too belatedly of the date of his departure. Though only a day's journey away she had had no right to see him. She found the visiting-room shutters closed.

There they were, 800 of them standing in columns four men wide, divided into groups in strict order—the ones who would be off to the continental mainland at Cayenne or Kourou: at Saint-Laurent du Maroni and its environs, Saint Maurice, Nouveau-Camp and Godebert; then those allocated to the so-called *Iles du Salut* (Isles of Health—a wry joke) set aside for the tough nuts... the islands of Royale, Saint-Joseph and Devil's Island, notorious for their shark-infested waters. Places from which one did not escape. The chaplain arrived to urge them to repent of their sins. And blessed them.

Alexandre found the chaplain's tone of pathos rather amusing. The fellow had called to see him in his cell. Most of their conversation had concerned Mirabeau and Henri de Rochefort who had gone before him in the four square metres that he occupied.

'And that was that. And so they set off at a march,' writes Pyguillem, transformed into a genial reporter in his inimitable style. 'They passed one gate, crossed a small enclosure, passed through another gate and entered the main courtyard leading to the drawbridge.

Souls seemed to have vanished! All that remained was the noise of the flock's clogs and another, dry, metallic sound which followed the curt order 'Load arms!' called out by the captain of gendarmerie.

Led by the official cortege, flanked by rifles, they crossed over the drawbridge and found themselves in front of a little old dock. They then followed a shady lane edged with tamarisk tress, then peeled off on to a grassy track which crossed the La Barquette wood and was known as 'the lane of sighs'.

The voice of the sea mingled with that of the wind which was unceasing at this point: and together they invested the scene with a note of unparalleled sadness.

They arrived at the quayside. Here there was a change in decor and a change of atmosphere too. Excitement was at fever pitch but was sensed rather than seen. The closed shutters hinted at the intense curiosity that they harboured. Some were even perforated by small mysterious holes through which ingenious photographers devised ways of taking pictures.'

No one was allowed to position himself along the column's route. A hundred metres away, a tiny woman with hair prematurely white was shouting at the top of her voice. Her fist pounded the rough bonnet of a fusilier.

'Let me be! Let me through won't you, brutes! Brutes! It's my son!'

Her voice did not carry. Marie was downwind of Alexandre who did not turn his head.

She could not understand. Why were they quarantining him like a plague carrier? Why were they treating him like a savage! Why could he no longer supply her with theatre tickets as he had in the past? For twenty years she was to refuse to comprehend the irreversibility of deportation to the colonies.

'They wouldn't even let me kiss him goodbye!' she was to moan in 1925.

They boarded the barges a half hour later in La Pallice harbour, they drew up alongside the steamship *Loire*. One by one they clambered up the iron ladder. Arriving on deck, they tossed their kit into the hold and climbed down behind it.

*'Poorly educated* (the phrase is spot on), defective, degenerate, abnormal they may have been, to be sure: but they were men for all that and at that moment they realised that punishment cannot be eluded (...)

Aboard the prison-ship: eight cages accommodating about 100 men each. They lacked for nothing, not even central heating, which came in the shape of steam pipes... which served a dual purpose... These 'gentlemen' have no grounds for complaint!

Alexandre, singled out as ever, was placed in a special cage with three other prisoners held, like him, to be dangerous. An especially substantial pipe, ready to belch forth boiling steam, hung above their heads.

On Christmas evening, at roughly the time when Rose and Clarenson, who had chanced to find themselves in the same Black Maria, arrived at the Beauvais prison, the Loire was putting in at Algiers where some Arab convicts were taken on board. Then the ship put out to sea again.

In all, the crossing took sixteen days. With a half-hour's release each morning to stand in silence looking out to sea. One had to avail of this opportunity to fill one's lungs with oxygen very quickly, before plunging back into the stench of vomit, filth and mildew. At the start the blabbermouths got worked up. In bursts of cackling laughter they thundered against their ill luck. Broke into bawdy songs familiar to everybody. Roared out their dirty jokes. The tone was set by the vilest of them. The others were to follow suit. Vice is contagious. It spreads like the itch. The levelling influence of the sordid. How were delicate, sensitive souls like Baudy or Bour going to stand up to this treatment?

Alexandre clung pig-headedly to his silence. Observing out of one corner of his eye. His cage-mates tried to bait him. One look, one smile was enough to perish the thought. With a reputation like his, they opted not to persist.

As the days passed, the muggy warmth of the stinking hothouse increased. Open-mouthed toughs stewed in their own juice, gasping for some unlikely breath of air. On 6 January the pulse of the engines slowed. They put in to land. Alexandre was ferried aboard a small steamboat which commuted between the mainland and the islands. He was put ashore first on Royale island, the islands' administrative centre, hospital and workshop: then he was moved to Saint Joseph, where the discipline was most ferocious and to which he had, naturally, been assigned. Devil's island, where Captain Dreyfus resided was set aside for political deportees. Anarchists, being deemed criminal convicts, were denied entry there.

At first glance, a vision of paradise. Luxuriant greenery. Coconut trees. Sky-blue seas. Sun of molten lead. This was not that steam-bath Cayenne: when it rained in sudden downpours, the sea breeze wafted away the humidity. In this respect, they were rather better favoured than the contingent assigned to Saint Laurent. There were fewer teeming vermin: mosquitoes, midges, stinging flies, ordinary flies, Cayenne flies, chigoes (tiny black fleas which punctured the skin to lay their eggs in the soles of the feet), ticks, agouti lice, manioc-ants, spider crabs, tarantulas, millipedes as big as a finger, scorpions, snakes of every variety and degree of poisonousness, caimans—anything that crawled, sucked and stung on the continental mainland was less virulent here. The sharks, it is true, largely made up for that.

Just as the shuttle-boat made land, a small craft pulled out of the harbour. On board were three men rowing... convicts... and one warder who was waving a bell. Coming within a few strokes of the shore the boat stopped. A makeshift coffin cobbled together from rough planks was thrown overboard. Immediately, from every direction, sharks scurried towards it. They snatched away the planks and the convict's corpse glided into the water. There was a flurry of fins. Within

minutes nothing remained of what had once been a man. The ocean scavengers had done their work. All things considered, this hygienic solution was a preventive against epidemics.

Next, the arrival. Alexandre took in the new place of residence offered him by the French State, a residence which might well be his final resting place. A fortified stockade. A rather steep hill leading up to the camp which consisted of two lines of rectangular huts, each of them 25 metres long and 6 metres across. Each barrack held 60–70 individuals, each of whom had at best 80 centimetres in which to lodge his shoulders and arms. The ceiling was of corrugated iron, apparently not insulated.

It was noon by the time he dumped his kitbag on to a plank-bed pointed out by one of the turnkeys. No soup for him: it had been doled out in batches of ten, at ten o'clock. Next came the siesta. Or rather the daily hour of toasting. The temperature hovered somewhere between 30 and 50 degrees in the shade. Everything was sticky. Men oozed sweat, panted and moaned.

Alexandre was allocated work: breaking up rocks in a quarry for repair work on the damaged jetty. After that he would be sent off to quarry something else. What, scarcely mattered. None of the activity was genuinely productive. The most pressing tasks were handled first. Ground invaded by the jungle was wrested back from it. Roofing torn off by a storm was repaired. They went angling to afford some variety to the diet. The colony was self-supporting. By dispatching cost-free labour to the tropics, its inventors had thought they were giving a helping hand to colonisation. But the contrary happened. Voluntary emigrants, eager to make their fortunes in the tropics, but rightly terrified by the proximity of the convict settlement, had failed to settle there the way they had settled in Indochina or Algeria. For its part, the Prison Administration, the redoubtable *Tentiaire* had produced not a thing. Out of the 4500 transportees present in 1910, allowances made for the dying, the weak, the ones in the 'hole', the sick, the ones in cushy jobs, employed as servants by a few individuals, turnkeys, administrative staff... barely 700 were available to engage in any construction work: a telegraph line, the railroad from Maroni, the No 1 colonial highway above all: a splendid achievement: in 60 years eighty kilometres had been hacked out at the cost of seventy convict lives per month; 17,000 had perished at two points alone along the way... at kilometre 80 and kilometre 36. Perished because they were not fed enough to ward off their hunger and no longer had the strength to lift their pickaxes. Because, for want of quinine, fevers struck them down like flies. Because they hadn't even slippers any more: 'When they had, they used to sell them,' the Administration stated. Their bare feet were open sores, stumps gnawed away by all sorts of sores.

At that rate, productivity was slight. Moreover, those deported to Mauthausen sampled these same methods and for the organisation of his camps Hitler needed only to borrow from the example we set over a hundred year period.

In the weeks which followed his arrival, Alexandre took the measure of the place and its people. One obsession haunted him: breaking out. Doing what no one, or almost no one had ever done successfully... get away from the islands. But how to go about it when one was not left on one's own for a second and when, as he guessed, stool pigeons were watching his every move?

His first and most pressing task was to get them to respect him. Among those anarchists deported to Saint-Joseph for overindulgence in individual repossession or undue familiarity with explosives, he numbered only friends. To them he was a hero. They took it upon themselves to enhance his reputation among the other prisoners. However, as in the days when he was learning the seaman's trade, his attitude at first did him a disservice, he neither drank nor gambled, and he refused to have any truck with the blemish of pederasty.

Then, of an evening once the hut door had been locked up by the turnkeys (as the warders were known in these parts) while each of them kept his eyes peeled, the convicts' real life began. Couples entwined. Some were 'married' almost officially with the tacit approval of the warders. The Arab turnkeys took a hand in these games. From time to time, even the camp commander gave couples the chance to build themselves a 'love nest', a hut of boards, foliage and odds and ends of wood where they might be alone together. Liquor inflamed their passions. There followed fits of jealousy and deadly confrontations at knife point between inmates vying for the affections of some nancy-boy.

What is more, anything supplied the excuse to slash and hack: one pretended to have spotted a flea on his best friend's shoulder. Another accused a third of having robbed him or looked at him sideways.

The fighting took place in the narrow aisles between the planks which served as beds, in an atmosphere that was electrified. The following morning, when the screw came upon the corpse, nobody had seen or heard a thing. Nobody knew anything. The Administration would make do with imposing a light collective punishment on the hut: after all, the upshot was that there was one convict less to worry about.

Should some stool pigeon betray the killer, it would cost him his life.

For personal quarrels involving jealousy, thieving or cheating may have been settled 'amicably' among those involved, but 'high treason' (betrayal to the staff of the *Tentiaire*, be it understood) concerned the collectivity to a man. And was subject to court martial. In every camp, a kangaroo court of a judge and elected jurors sat. Against its findings there was no appeal. Penalties ranged from one or two knife wounds up to death. The jury appointed some one to carry out the sentence and that someone did not have the right to decline, unless he wanted to suffer the same fate as the culprit.

This rugged code made but one concession to generosity: the one who might be found guilty was given a chance to elect for himself the manner of execution, by cold steel or by poison. Everybody had a shiv: flick-knives made by lags and selling at three or four francs apiece, or steel daggers cobbled together by a convict in the workshop, under the nose of the warder and turnkey who were going to share in his profit from the sale. Not that poison was any harder to get hold of: one had only to grab some barbadine root or thorn-apple from the jungle, or apply to the head of the infirmary, slipping him some money for a little powdered *Hura crepitans*: it was quick-working and left no trace, not even at the autopsy.

But the favourite pastime of these nightmarish nights was gambling: marseillaise or three card brag, squatting on the ground, with dog-eared deck of cards by the light of a shrouded lantern. Playing for what? One's 'stake', which is to say, the pocket-money which consisted of one's aluminium tube, some 6–8 centimetres in length, comprising two parts which clip together hermetically, like a thermometer case and which one concealed in the anus.

This tube was one's personal treasure. To get hold of one, one willingly gutted others and rifled through their bowels. With great kicks in the stomach, the infirmary attendants retrieved the ones belonging to patients who had just died in their care. A man afflicted by dysentery trembled for his welfare: he could no longer hold on to his treasure. He had to bury it in the ground somewhere, painstakingly wrapped in a oil-soaked rag. Very often, quite a drama ensued: some rat would gnaw at the rag, the hidden object became visible, someone stole it and the shivs would come out again.

As for the 'stake' itself, that had two origins: money orders sent by one's family (once the warders had pocketed at least half, this legalised theft having become a tradition), or from a multitude of small deals, swindles, all manner of trafficking in tobacco, food, booze, shivs, and poison... with the blessing of the warders of course.

All of this repelled Alexandre—just as the owners of châteaux revolted him. He refused to have any truck with this petty, sordid thievery. While other breathlessly slammed down their cards, ready to cut throats for a *demi-louis*, he was greedily reading what volumes he had hoarded from Marie that the Administration had not confiscated on their way through. Within a few years his learning would be immense. Jean Normand, a law graduate who was his mess-mate for four years was later to testify to this in his book *Les Mystères du Bagne*: 'At intervals, Jacob received the *Mercur de France*... he pondered literature with Jean de Gourmont, Rachide, etc. He kept abreast of the arts via Georges Kahn, the theatre with Henri Béraud, the press with De Bury, recent legislation with Renaud, history with Bartholémy, military matters with Jean Morel and the sciences with Bohn.' At the moment he was on Malebranche, who was not censored ('Send me, if you can, Malebranche's *Inquiry into Truth*. Cartesian philosopher, metaphysician and spiritualist, the author is well-meaning and can, I believe be ranked with the finest moralists. In view of which the book will be passed on to me.') Beggars could not be choosers: his Nietzsche books had just been confiscated from him.

But above all, he took his first steps into the jungle of penal and administrative law. He still held in contempt what some referred to as justice. But he was no longer in a position of strength: he had to depend on his wits. If he wanted to survive the snares set for him by this 'justice', reckoning on his ignorance, he would have to get to know the strings before he could work them. The astute made use of the code to make their fortunes. He, a pure heart, would be constrained and forced to avail of it to assert his right to dissent and to breathe. Recently he had been doing his fighting from the outside, storming the bastions of the rich. These had cast him into oblivion. The urge to return from it was a legitimate one. But it was also a duty: so that he might bear witness and give battle again. In order to live an exemplary life *against*.

Just as in days now gone he had pored over sea currents in the din of the crew's quarters, he now pored over law books: 'I studied criminal law to familiarise myself with the rules and regulations the better to break them,' he was to state one day.

And to Maître Lafont, Alcide Ader's former defence counsel, he was to write: 'Perhaps you may find it a touch ironic to find me so competent and so truly familiar with French and foreign penal law. Permit me to answer you, without the slightest boastfulness that, as an auto-didact, I have studied law with Garaud, G. Vidal, Cruche (sorry, Cuhe!), Tarde, Lombroso, Garafolo, Enrico Ferri, Garçon, Huguene, Maxwell, Beccaria, Bentham, de Rossi, Von Litz, Prius, and Van Hamel, to cite some at random, and other authors whom I have forgotten.'

Little by little, despite his moral rigour which some *caïds* (big shots) found irksome, his personality triumphed in the 'red hut'. He had several things going for him: his intransigent attitude towards the 'enemy' i.e. anybody, big or small, who represented the Administration, his integrity ('excessive', Normand opines), his imperturbable good humour, his sense of fun, his knife, his anarchist pals and his obliging ways.

The latter was the cause of his first punishment in July 1906. Having been asked by a fellow-prisoner to act for him in drawing up a complaint against one particularly despicable warder, Alexandre obliged with his customary verve, adhering to the letter of the regulations: and got eight days confinement to his cell for his pains.



At which point he became acquainted with this terrible punishment. A cell 1.40 metres long by 2 metres high. One could only crouch or stand, never stretch out. For twelve hours of the day rings shackled his feet to an iron bar, thereby also keeping him on his back, making it impossible to turn: for the other twelve hours he had to cut broom-handles. Or more generally turn his hand to some systematically pointless chore designed to instil in the guilty a 'feeling of moral harassment'. With only bread and water to sustain him. The cage was roofless: the roof had been replaced by a grill across which the screws tramped back and forth.

His week's punishment completed, Alexandre was made hut watchman: from now on he was accountable for incidents in the night. If a murder took place he would pay in place of the unknown killer. If he got involved in a brawl it would be at his own risk and peril.

But this move backfired on the Administration: Alexandre's prestige in the eyes of his fellow prisoners grew. He became their justice of the peace, the arbiter of their differences, their legal advisor, and above all their mentor: he had ideas enough for all. So much so that a new 'Jacob gang' took shape, taking steps to have him appointed cook in the hope that his honesty, cunning and daring might permit the wretched denizens of the huts, the last links in a long chain of cheating and greedy shark-dealing, to eat a little more decently.

If the regulations were to be believed, the food there, as on Saint-Martin, was acceptable: fresh or tinned meat or bacon at noon, with a half litre of broth, rice or dried vegetables with a further half litre of broth for the evening meal which was taken at five pm. Plus 750 grammes of bread per day. In fact, when the dishes were not changed (which was a frequent occurrence) scarcely a third of this dietary found its way into the convicts' mess-tin.

In the kitchens, Alexandre was none too startled to discover various fraudulent practices: as far as bread went, the convict in charge of the bakery added as much water as possible to the flour and sold off what he had skimmed off, sharing the proceeds with the warders. As far as coffee went a similar ploy was used. In respect of meat, things went a little further: steers shipped live from the continent were supposed to equal a certain weight. In reality, since there were no scales on the island there was no way of verifying this. Things were even better when the stock did not have anthrax, as Doctor Rousseau tells us did occur on several occasions.

To the extent of his area of competence, Alexandre stamped out the sharp practices. This was not to everyone's liking. One of the turnkeys threatened that he would have his hide. Alexandre just shrugged. A second, capitalising upon Jacob's back being turned, concealed among his personal effects a warder's uniform which he himself had stolen, and then reported Alexandre to supervisor Venturini for stealing and attempted escape. Alexandre spotted the plant just in time and disposed of this unwelcome gift. Venturini, one of the few honest screws on the island, took his part. The turnkey was silenced. The food improved a bit. Alexandre's prestige grew.

A few days after this, Hespel turned up with his lieutenant in his wake. Hespel, a convict who acted as executioner, was so hated that he had the amazing right to carry a revolver. He demanded a double ration: this was the custom. Alexandre refused him his double helping: it was against regulations. Hespel's eyes flashed. No one had ever dared defy him so. But for the presence of witnesses he would undoubtedly have drawn his gun alleging that Alexandre had made to attack him.

'You'll pay for that,' he grunted.

Next day, his lieutenant returned alone to collect both their rations. He held out a receptacle. Mechanically, just as he was about to ladle out the broth, Alexandre glanced at it. At the bottom

of it lay a little ochre liquid. In a flash, he understood: it was some barbadine. Hespel wanted to have it believed that Alexandre had tried to poison him.

‘You bastard!’ he roared. ‘I know what you’ve poured into that.’

Venturini arrived on the scene. Seeing them, he too understood. Coolly, Alexandre then poured the poison on to the ground.

‘Damned idiot!’ Venturini bellowed. ‘You could have had him shot! With your record, if his ploy had worked you’d have been a candidate for the guillotine!’

‘I handle my business by myself,’ was Alexandre’s reply.

The story spread around the island. Alexandre became a sort of *cacique*. One year on from his arrival, he was one of the unchallenged leaders of Saint-Joseph. The big shots had no choice but to respect him: they might have need of his legal advice. The weak sought his protection. The turnkeys kept an eye on him. His was an all-seeing eye. His advice was sought on everything. He became a terrible nuisance for the Administration. From then on, commandant Michel, the director of the Iles du Salut had him locked up in an isolation cell every night, shackles on his feet. Alexandre sent protest letters to the director of the penal settlements. Marie was busy in Paris—on the basis of which paragraph of what regulation could a convict be punished without reason? Michel had to set him free: ‘I, who knew upwards of a thousand deportees in the Iles du Salut by their names and registration numbers at any one time, knew them by their good points and their failings,’ wrote the commandant, ‘have been thwarted by one of them. For years he has stood up to me. I regarded him ultimately as a dangerous foe to myself and to society. We had to bring him to grief or he would bring us to grief. He was Jacob, the leader of the *Night Workers*, the fellow who provided novelist Maurice Leblanc with inspiration for his hero Arsen Lupin. Jacob... a figure worthy of legend...

‘The fellow had no needs but he had overweening pride. He it was who wrote to his mother from the penal settlement. ‘When one can claim never to have betrayed anyone and always to have honoured one’s given word, that is a much greater comfort than pointless approval from others.’

Between the commandant and the convict a bitter and subtle warfare broke out. ‘We feared that such a gang boss, an organiser endowed with a cool and guileful character might be capable of dragging a whole penitentiary into some bloody uprising,’ the commandant goes on. ‘Subsequent events proved that such fears were not unfounded.’

Again the commandant had him confined as a security precaution. He failed, however, to prevent him from communicating with others: ‘And it was he, the caged man, who became one of the most dangerous of the punished men dispatched to the islands.’

A category A convict, whom they did not even dare to send to the atrocious Charvein lest he contaminate the other ‘incorrigibles’ there, Alexandre by 1908 found himself in the same sort of position he had been in at the age of twenty: alone against the whole of society. And the reason was the same: a pathological allergy to injustice.

Robin Hood sweltered in Cayenne. Industrial society has not the time to lend an ear to those who call it into question, nor does it behead them, it makes use of them. The approach it adopted with regards to Jacob are summed up in a few figures: well nigh 9 years locked up in a cell or in solitary; seven hearings before the special military tribunal at Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, the ultimate court of appeal for deportees; and six acquittals. One verdict overturned by the court of cassation. 17 escapes. During all of which ordeals Jacob was to maintain the same whimsicality,

the same dignity, the same *panache* at which this extract from a letter dated January 1908 and selected at random, hints:

‘Dear mother, of course you are right to keep me informed of the vicissitudes of your life. If you can’t pour out your heart to me, whom can you do it to? Am I not the one most affected by it?’

‘Occasionally, I may have written to you somewhat drily at a time when, ailing and undermined by fever and prostrate from dysentery, I was inclining towards a somewhat overgrown pessimism... You are unhappy enough as you are without my adding still further to your burden...’

Since her release Marie had been earning six *sous* an hour as a bespoke dressmaker, specially at Madame Bouillot’s, she being a sympathiser who was quickly to become a friend. What finer refutation could there have been of those who might have supposed that her son had a stash salted away?

From Alexandre she received two sorts of correspondence, the formal, which the *Tentiaire* had gone over with a fine tooth comb and whose compromising passages she had to read between the lines; and then, from time to time, through the agency of some less closely monitored deportee, more detailed, coded letters, coded lest they fall into unwarranted hands. Through the latter, Alexandre charged her in 1907 to mount a scheme whose principle executor Malato promptly volunteered to be.

Since Amiens, Charles Malato had had scarcely any rest. Above all he had been implicated in the attempt made on the life of the young king of Spain, Alfonso XIII, at the junction of the Rue de Rivoli and the rue de Rohan on 31 May 1905. Two bombs had left 17 people injured in an obscure plot, the police role in which remains unclear, but which led to Malato’s being brought up before the assizes. Lucien Descaves, Vaughan, the erstwhile director of *L’Aurore*, Henri Rochefort and Aristide Briand among other personalities appeared as witnesses on his behalf, and prosecutor Bulot, for all his rough, had had to resign himself to the acquittal. Alexandre wrote to him whenever he could and the militant had, for his part, given Marie an occasional helping hand.

The deportee’s plan seemed logical enough: since the escape of someone interned on the islands was fraught with too many risks, they would have to take it one step at a time.

1. He would have to earn a ‘first class’ report. A decree of 18 June 1880 specified that this was granted automatically provided that one had not been placed on report for 18 months. Consequently, Alexandre was to strive to be on his best behaviour for the required period;
2. Next he would apply to be granted a concession, a small plot of land to clear somewhere on the island. Pini, the anarchist from the *Intransigenti* group, sentenced to a life term in 1890 for having indulged in individual repossessions and having insisted that he was entitled so to do, had secured one some five years before. As they were awarded only in exceptional cases;
3. Alexandre was, in the meanwhile to marry a young girl concerning whom he would claim they had been engaged for years and years (who she might be did not really matter as long as she was not Rose, of course, who, even if she was freed from Beauvais prison in time, would be too suspect). This volunteer wife would travel out to join him: tradition meant that the Administration could not refuse a concession to a ‘first class’ category prisoner accompanied by a wife;

4. From then on, availing of the solitary nature of life in the bush, he would quietly build himself a raft. It would be loaded with a water-butt and barrel of pork; a makeshift sail would be made: they would head north-north-east for three days to meet the Gulf Stream and the trade winds that would enable them to bypass Dutch and British Guyana where they might be handed back to the Administration. If they made it to Venezuela, Colombia or Central America they would be free! Duval, the militant of the '*Pantère des Batignolles*' fame, the trial-blazer in the repossession business and himself deported to Saint Joseph had made good his escape by precisely this method. Now he was living a comfortable life among the New York comrades along with his wife. And Duval, unlike Alexandre, had not been an experienced seaman.

It all began very smoothly. Alexandre avoided punishments. For his part, Malato unearthed a wife in the shape of a militant of Russian extraction, one Olga K. who enthused at the idea of giving herself to the cause by helping to rescue the celebrated Escande. Her fare for the trip was raised through collections in the Parisian groups. All that Olga awaited now was a sign from Alexandre and she would be off to join him.

Alas! The anarchist's peaceable behaviour far from reassuring the warders, made them suspicious. One day in May 1908, they searched the corner where he slept. A coded letter was discovered under a floorboard. The cipher service broke the code: the game was up. The minister for the colonies and the Interior minister were alerted. The head of the *Sûreté* launched an investigation. He sent out his sloops to sniff around Marie, her employer and friend Madame Bouillot and Malato. But the latter had followed Alexandre's instructions to the letter and, despite the evidence amassed, nothing could be proved.

As for Alexandre himself, the camp commandant made do with sentencing him to four days nocturnal confinement for 'breach of regulation', while sheering:

'You've lost your touch. Your confederate was pathetic. Even if your Olga had come out to join you, you wouldn't have been released from custody, not with your record! Come off it, Jacob! Category A plus Category B and in prison for murder! Even after 18 months good behaviour, there is no release for a bastard like you to look forward to. You'll die here.'

Jacob was outraged. He asked Marie to look up Maître Lafont to get him to submit an appeal against abuse of authority to the Supreme Court. He did his damndest to preach revolt to his fellow prisoners. He held them breathless for whole nights with discourses on what the new libertarian world would be like... No judges, no gendarmes, no screws, no robbers and no robbed. The convicts put questions to him.

'But would I then have the right to bump off the turnkeys without being punished?'

'You wouldn't, because there wouldn't be any turnkeys!'

Time became a burden to him. For one whole year he had fed upon the hopes of that break-out. It had been only a dream. He had to resign himself to direct action now, with all the risks it implied. But it was hopeless unless he could join forces with confederates less closely watched than himself.

So he talked three 'grade A's' into having a go with him. On his instructions, the three built a raft out of banana tree trunks. With a plank for rudder. A stake for mast. Sacks for sails. A water-butt, and a barrel of pork.

In September 1908, Alexandre sawed through the bars of his hut, joined his confederates and made for the 'Flat Rock', a huge rock jutting into the sea in the north of the island from where

they were to cast off. There as ill fortune would have it they ran into two entwined turnkeys. Alexandre drew his stiletto. The other three hesitated. The Arabs swore that if their lives were spared, they would say nothing. But the escape was out: that would only compromise them. Alexandre did not believe a word of this fool's bargain. But his companions swallowed it. So he had to sheathe his stiletto again.

The following morning, he was transferred to Royale Island, and sentenced to 30 days in solitary. This was his first taste of the 'hole'. A rat-infested hole, or rather a coffin, just big enough to accommodate a body. Pitch darkness. A tiny hole at ground level to let in air. Leg irons attached to rings situated at either end of an iron bar. Beneath the body, a hard plank, straining the back. The discomfort was interrupted twice daily, for five minutes each time for urination purposes. Food: two days out of every three on dry bread and water. When one emerged alive from it, one was like a slug more than a man.

For a month, Alexandre recited passages from Stirner, Neitzsche and Bakunin to himself, knowing them by heart. He relived his expeditions against churches and châteaux. Had they been worth it? Yes, a hundred times yes. For the example and the hope they offered. One day he would break out and would make a different start, more skilfully this time. The horrors which surrounded him, and which, in the final analysis were the secretions of society itself were further reasons for altering the world. One thought sustained him: Marie, who was devoted to him and thought constantly of him, and wrote petitions on behalf of his being given a pardon to everyone she heard tell of, ministers, prosecutors or presidents of the Republic.

Coughing. The fever racked him again. He was removed from his burial-hole on a stretcher for placement on a ship bound for Saint-Joseph and thence to the infirmary. A tiny hut which looked from the outside very smart with its brick walls and tiled roof overhanging a mango and a breadfruit tree.

But the inside was like a sort of huge rubbish bin where the remnants of human beings were in agony. Two lepers moaned and railed in one corner, sacking wrapped around their purulent sores; there were no bandages. And even less medicaments. And even if there were, rather than administer them to the patients, the attendants, once the doctor's back was turned, would have sold them off to line their own pockets. On the other hand, there was a double helping of food.

Within a few days, he had made a well-nigh miraculous recovery. In addition, there was something mysterious in this ailing fellow's having survived over a twenty year period, physical ordeals that got the better of more robust types.

Every 'graduate' of the infirmary was entitled to enjoy a few days convalescing in comparative freedom. Not Alexandre, though. But the order had not been communicated to chief warder Columbani who came on duty that morning. So, all morning long, Alexandre was able to loaf around in peace at the edge of the sea. A luxury he had not known for so long. It was a splendid opportunity to familiarise himself better with the topography of the place. All of a sudden, he sighted a silhouette on some rocks far from any beaten track. He knew that face. His heart leapt. His fists clenched. He accosted the fellow.

'Hey you!' he said, 'Weren't you a trusty in Saint-Martin in December 1905?'

'Not at all, you're mistaken,' the man stammered. 'I arrived in 1903.'

Alexandre scrutinised the registration number written on the convict's arm. It was him all right, the guy who had spat into his mess tin. The place was deserted. He pounced. Drew his stiletto. Rained knife blows on him: smashed his skull on the rocks then dumped the body into the sea. The sharks would see to the rest. At noon, the chief warden, finally alerted to the formidable

34477's wandering around unsupervised, shut him up in his hut. That evening the trustee was posted as missing. The next morning a convict sent out to fish found some remnants of flesh. He used them for bait.

'Really!' one warder concluded by way of eulogy, 'He'll have slipped the rocks. The shark will have had him.'

Two months later, that November, came the third escape attempt. Alexandre had again been committed to the infirmary for 4 days. Three patients already there had everything ready for the break-out. He joined them. A tunnel had been dug under the walls of the encampment. Once more supplies and sacks for the sails had been collected. And even a complete warder's outfit down to the kepi, priceless in the event of the currents' driving them back towards the mainland: a warder with three convicts in tow would raise no suspicions. It only remained to build a raft. That could be done in a single night.

Just as he was emerging into the open air, Alexandre thought he heard some noises. He pushed the satchel in front of his head. A flurry of sabre blows hacked through the satchel. Somebody had squealed. That somebody would pay for it. Meanwhile, Alexandre was sent back to the hole, for just two weeks this time, for the inquiry was unable to prove his actual involvement.

## II

### PETITION TO THE LORD CHANCELLOR.

*A mother broken by extraordinary woes petitions Your Merciful Eminence for a pardon for her wretched son, Alexandre Jacob. I should like to enfold my son in my arms before I die, for I am prematurely mightily aged and profoundly stricken in my whole being (...)*

*I consider that my son is a victim, my son who has not ceased being the most loving, most devoted, best of sons and who began by being the most trustworthy, most honest of workers.*

*A victim first of his father, my husband, a violent, idle alcoholic who never bothered himself with the education of our son, but made his life a misery, forcing him to leave us as early as the age of eleven years. Then this poor little one, abandoned to his own devices, was the victim of the company he kept from the age of sixteen years on. His excitability, tendency to unhealthy generosity and his fondness for reading about social sciences and social issues were easy prey for exploitation.*

*Our tale, his and mine, is truly lamentable. At the age of seventeen, in Marseilles, he began to know the awful spiral of brushes with the courts (...) Today I survive by dress-making commissions, when not laid low by illness... I shall live on hope..*

The dysentery did not let up. Alexandre found himself obliged to entrust his *plan* to Ferrand, convict No 34724 who had just been assigned to the same hut as him and who quite naturally took up the duties of his right hand man. He had high hopes of this plan, for, in addition to the sizeable 'outlay' of 800 francs, a Rothschild-ean sum for a deportee, it involved, as Doctor Rousseau was to tell it later on: 'a spanner in three parts, ten gadgets for opening 40 varieties of lock, a pair of small wire cutters and five hacksaw blades.' With which to open the colony director's safe

without the aid of any other instrument, as he was to do out of bravado upon request from the latter whenever he had lost his keys.

Ferrand concealed the *plan* in a sliver of soap. The latter was stolen. Alexandre immediately suspected one Ferranti, alias Capeletti ... 'one of the basest minds I have ever come across', according to the testimony of another convict by the name of Antoine Mesclon who has written his memoirs<sup>2</sup>, 'and a great scrapper to boot, with his knife always at the ready and on the lookout for any opportunity to strike terror. And he was an invert, active and passive alike, but chiefly passive. There were extenuating circumstances: while still a child, at the age of seven or eight, I believe, he had been placed in reformatories, where he had remained illiterate'.

The whole of Saint-Joseph despised this Ferranti-Capeletti and it was only because of his vicious savagery that he had not yet been 'punctured'. He had turned in Pellegrin, who was going to the guillotine thanks to him. He was suspected of having poisoned two convicts with thorn-apple. The proper place for him would have been an asylum among the psychopaths. Since the age of seven or eight, nobody, not his relations nor society had bothered to educate him. They punished him. By this time it was too late: he had really caught a dose of rabies.

'He intrigued me,' says Mesclon. 'One day I put some elementary questions to him. I had a detailed knowledge of the armed robbery attempt he had made in Valence, where I myself came from, and for which he had been sentenced to twenty years (...)

'And what do you have to say now about your life on the islands?' I asked him.

'I am not unhappy. I drink, eat, smoke and can play cards.

'Each time that a convoy arrived in the islands, he sought out convicts who came from Valence. That is how I made his acquaintance when I arrived.'

'You come from Valencia, eh?'

'Yeah.'

'Well then, you're a queer. You won't be unhappy here.'

Some onlooker told him 'You're wrong, he's a real man', whereupon he scrutinised me more attentively and confined himself to saying, 'Ah'.

'It was not hard to tell that he was of moronic intellect. At the same time, aside from his animal-like eyes, I regarded his body as well proportioned, creating an impression of health.'

In the presence of the entire hut, Alexandre made his accusation of theft against this .. 'human organism bereft of all self-control, incapable of grasping anything at all'. Essentially, that meant a duel to the death. But Capeletti was too sharp to dare stand up to Jacob. He preferred to poison him slowly, and Ferrand too. He began that very day. Luckily only a few days had gone by when Taillefer saw him pour some drops of liquid into the *lentil soup* (this detail is significant) of the two anarchists and tipped them off. Mesclon witnessed the events: Capeletti was surprised just at the point when the mess-tins ranged around the dish, had just been filled, and caught slipping into it something that could only have been some poison.

'Without a word of warning J. and F. pounced on him and without pausing plunged their knives several times each into his back and chest, whereupon a terrified Capeletti fled to the back of the hut.

'There, already mortally wounded and slumped upon his plank-bed, he shouted at his killers with what strength he had left.. 'Murderers! Murderers!' Whereupon J. returned and struck him until he had breathed his last, a moment that was not long in coming.

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<sup>2</sup> *Comment j'ai subi quinze ans de bagne*, 1931.

‘Capeletti died, his body bled completely dry. This was a relief, a general satisfaction for the whole camp.

‘However, a dog given a little of the content of the mess-tin died of it.

‘J. and F. asked that the requisite analysis be carried out.

‘But since, in the penal settlement, there is always someone with an interest in seeing someone else sentenced, whether among the inmates or among the administrative personnel, the contents of the mess-tin were thrown out and replaced and the analysis was, of course, negative.’

For Alexandre, this negative finding meant that he would be indicted for voluntary homicide, unable to plead self defence or extenuating circumstances: that meant the guillotine. He was tossed into a cell, prior to being referred to the Special Military Tribunal which sat in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni. He deliberated. He made inquiries. The warder who had come upon Ferrand and himself, still wielding their knives had indeed carried the mess-tin away to camp commandant Raymond, who for his part, claimed to have passed it on to the medical service on Royale Island. Doctor Benjamin claimed to have fed a little of the contents to two chickens and a dog who were none the worse for it. Who was lying? For the dog on Saint Joseph had indeed died. Alexandre sensed that he was the victim of an unstoppable conspiracy. Raymond and commandant Michel had long been gunning for him: and now they had him.

Despite everything he managed to get a message out to his mother via a deportee. She was to fetch Malato. Ask him to conceal a couple of revolvers complete with ammunition in two boxes of conserves and send them to Faulx, alias Madelon, who was not so closely supervised, to arrive at the end of September 1909. Faulx would pass on the present. Since he no longer had anything to lose, whenever Ferrand and he were on the boat taking them to Saint-Laurent, they would dispose of their fetters thanks to their tools. They would liquidate the guards. And take their chances.

Marie busied herself in Paris. She raced off to see Malato who took charge of acting upon Alexandre’s instructions. Then she scurried off to Maître Lafont’s: public opinion had to be alerted. Her son had simply defended himself. She sought Madame Bouillot’s advice. She besieged deputies and senators, wrote again to the Lord Chancellor, to the minister for the Colonies, to the president of the Republic. But who was interested in this dark tale taking place on the other side of the world, between two convicts?

On Royale, Alexandre appeared before the examining magistrate. The latter read Doctor Benjamin’s report. All of a sudden, the face of the accused brightened: the doctor referred to ‘beef broth’, not to lentil soup. Alexandre pointed this out to the deputy prosecutor who pooh-poohed his claim. Jacob insisted upon this detail’s being verified. Grudgingly he obliged. He returned with a long face: deportee 34477 was right.

‘Moreover,’ the imperturbable Alexandre went on, ‘according to a regulation dating from 1869 and never rescinded, the doctor, prior to drawing up his report, has to take an oath in Cayenne. Now, no boat travelled to the mainland nor returned from there between the day on which Capeletti died and the date on which the doctor signed his report.’

The magistrate checked this second point. He was troubled. Large beads of sweat stood on his forehead: the convict was right again.



‘As a result of which,’ Alexandre continued, ‘kindly take note that I am appealing to the Lord Chancellor, first against the camp commandant Raymond for abuse of authority, and then against Doctor Benjamin for false testimony’<sup>3</sup>.

And he, a deportee of the lowest category, did indeed seek injunctions against the doctor and the camp commandant. To be on the safe side, he alerted Marie to this and she continued to move heaven and earth in the ministries. The weeks passed. His feet in irons in his roofless shack, he whittled broom handles. He read a text by Epictetus, smuggled in to him. And he waited.

The boxes of preserves had not yet come when, on October 1909, the *Maroni* ferried him and Ferrand to Saint-Laurent. The hearing by the Special Military Tribunal opened on 5 October. There, they were forced to concede that there had indeed been an attempted poisoning. Raymond was confounded. He broke down in tears. A magnanimous Jacob withdrew his complaint. However.. ‘given that the accused is not entitled to take the law into his own hands,’ he was not acquitted: but got 5 years in the cells. 5 years in leg irons, on bread and water in a cage 1.40 metres long. This verdict was tantamount to saying: ‘For a start you should have let yourself be poisoned. Only once dead had you any right of self defence.’ Above all, it meant death, for nobody had ever survived a 5 year term like that.

Ferrand, less of a plum catch, got only 3 years: long enough, though, for him not to return from it.

On the boat trip back, on 11 October, an incident erupted. Bonal, a particularly sadistic creole guard tried to line the deportees up along the ship’s rail. It was raining. The seas were rough. The deck was covered by a mixture of spray and vomit. Bonal insisted that they stretch out there. Vinci, an Italian convict nibbling a crust of bread, hesitated, without raising his voice though, it seems, nor adopting any sort of threatening attitude. Bonal drew his revolver and studiously killed him: ‘He protested, I dropped him,’ he was to explain later as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Rumbly ripples rippled throughout the convict ranks.

‘Anybody else want some lead?’ sneered Bonal.

Alexandre kept a level head. Had the revolvers come in time, his reaction would undoubtedly have been different. But Ferrand had had enough. Stealthily he slipped out of the irons holding his feet and leapt into the water in view of the islands. The act of a desperate man: with those sharks he stood no chance. And even if he were to reach the shore in some overgrown part of the island, even if he were to succeed in building a raft in one night, where would he go without drinking water, no silas and no food?

The engines of the *Maroni* ceased. A dinghy was let down into the water. Two guards got into it, one of them Bonal. Within minutes, Ferrand had been recaptured. Bonal again drew his revolver, fired three times at point blank range and bungled it. He was just about to have another go when the other guard, Bessolo, aghast, intervened. Ferrand was hauled aboard the rocking dinghy. They made it back to the *Maroni*. Instantly, Bonal fell upon him, tore off his clothes, rained blows on him, demanded his plan and threatened to kill him like the mangy dog he was, if he did not hand it over. A half-dead Ferrand obliged.

There was nothing exceptional in the savagery of this Bonal fellow. Accounts of convict life are replete with acts of this ilk. Often the mentality of the guards was inferior to even the most depraved convict. They had been drawn to Guyane by material benefits: twice the pay offered in metropolitan France, a year’s paid leave every three years (passage paid) and a high pension.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alain Sergent, *Un anarchiste de la Belle Epoque*.

This they doubled again by means of their sharp dealings. For them anything could be a money maker: sometimes even selling their own wives to the convicts. And then especially although in France they were, being all but illiterate, on the lowest rung of the social ladder, here they became as gods. Their empire may have been derisory but their sway was absolute. They had the power of life and death over convicts. They could lie and make what accusations they liked: their word was gospel. The word of a deportee meant nothing alongside theirs.

In introducing transportation to the penal settlements in the time of Napoleon III in 1854, the lawmakers, taking Australia as their model, had intended, while ridding France of undesirables, to re-educate the criminal by inflicting upon him a punishment that was harsh and arduous but constructive. 'If expiation of crime and protection of society are better assured by the new legislation,' announced the deputy Du Miral, the sponsor of this brilliant notion in the Assembly, 'it also allows for more ready rehabilitation of the condemned.' In point of fact, the idea of *expiation* promptly took precedence over any idea of rehabilitation. The responsibility for this lay—not with the warden-lackeys—but with the system. And, beyond the system, with the vast majority of Frenchmen delighted to be rid of the dregs of society, Frenchmen who welcomed the toughening-up of the prison system under the Third Republic in 1891 (and this without the scapegoat of a dictatorship) and who, deep-down, had no wish to know what was going on over there. The criminal was a *filthy sort*. It was just too bad if, behind bars, he came into contact with an even *filthier* breed and if this ground him down deeper instead of raising him up. And all the better if his life was made a misery: that's why he was there.

Vindictive legislation, which had taken over the role of the Fearful God of the Bible, needed have no pity for this handful of knaves and accursed ones, with their *evil natures*, who posed a threat to the existence of *good folk*.

Protected by a complete hierarchy ranging from the minister through the penal colony director or the prosecutor-general, the screw/guard was thus at liberty to give free rein to his instincts. He became a sort of small-scale Nero. Each of his acts of harassment was morally justifiable in terms of the need to make the convict make amends. Stealing from a deportee was not stealing. Persecution of a deportee was legitimate. Killing a deportee was doing society a favour. The range of persecutions was boundless. Liard-Courtois, the anarchist whose release in 1899 was made possible by the Drefusard campaign conducted by Faure, Malato and company, has listed some<sup>4</sup>.

'Bidding good day to a comrade receiving hospital or infirmary treatment: 8 days' imprisonment.

'Fetching a sick man his bread or tobacco: 8 days confined to cells.

'Passing bread to someone under punishment: 30 days confined to cells.

'*Clandestine correspondence with the judicial administration or with a minister*: 60–125 days in the hole.

'Complaining about the inadequacy or poor quality of food: 30–60 days in the hole.

'Frivolous complaints to the prison commandant: 30–60 days in the hole.

'Making complaints which entailed some inconvenience or reprimand to the administrator: all manner of tortures until death followed.

'Presenting oneself sick on parade and being found not to be sick: 8–30 days' confinement to cells.

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<sup>4</sup> *Souvenirs du bagne*.

‘Walking barefoot in the village (this when the administration had not issued any boots for 18 months): 15 days’ confinement to cells.

‘Cutting a belt from one’s bedclothes for protection against dysentery (when the administration had confiscated a parcel from you containing a flannel belt, in order to sell it off): 60 days’ confinement to cells.

‘Having a face not to the liking of a warden-screw: harassment until the chance presented itself for him to put a bullet in your back,’ etc.

For all his self-control, this time Alexandre let himself wax indignant. Fifteen convicts, the boat’s crew and warder Bessolo had been witnesses to the killing of Vinci and the attempt made upon Ferrand’s life. Coming ashore on Royale island, he discreetly asked if everyone was agreed that he should make a complaint against Bonal. Everyone had his say on the matter. Bessolo pledged to back him up.

In the back of his cell, Alexandre thus wasted no time in drawing up a complaint against Bonal for ‘voluntary homicide and attempted homicide’, for forwarding to the Lord Chancellor.<sup>5</sup> One of the biggest mistakes he ever made. And that in a matter in which he was not directly concerned. A fortnight later, he learned that Bessolo had washed his hands of the matter: he could not back a convict against a colleague. It would cost him his job. As for the 15 passengers from the *Maroni*—with the exception, of course, of Ferrand—they had been threatened that they would die in the hole if they backed Jacob.

An inquiry was conducted on the spot by the prosecutor-general in the wake of Jacob’s complaint. The conclusion was that Jacob had misrepresented the incident and turned events on their head. The threatening attitude on the convicts’ part made firmness crucial. Bonal had made a mistake, not committed a crime. He had been a touch overhasty, that was all. Anyway he had been cited before a court martial for his action, as the law required. He had been acquitted and commended by the judges for his courage, then been transferred to Martinique to a job he had long had his eye on, and been promoted. The malice shown by Jacob and Ferrand required that they appear before the Special Maritime Tribunal for making a mischievous complaint. The Chancellor’s office would give a ruling on this.

On 22 February 1910, Marie was informed that everything was going badly. ‘Dear mother, were I to have to remain incarcerated, especially for five years, then it would mean a certain, slow and painful death, inevitably so. To be sure, I have no regrets about having queried the law in this matter, contrary to our beliefs, for the end justifies the means. Should I no longer see any way forward, I shall set aside disputation and I will 62.33.7.12.34.43.26.87 (revolt) openly rather than suffer in silence. I shall await your views on this matter.

‘Deportation is as different from what it was 4 years ago as night from day.

‘Just as it was easy and possible at the time of my arrival, so now it is difficult and, so to speak, impossible. I am talking about the three roses (the three islands) of course. They have erected perimeter walls, tripled the guards and set dogs everywhere. It is downright impregnable. The

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<sup>5</sup> When drafting official correspondence of this sort, Jacob systematically used to follow his signature with three dots in triangle formation. About fifteen letters testify to this. Was this supposed to impress those to whom he was writing? Was he really a Freemason? In which case, how long had he been one? Is this confirmation of the hypothesis of an embryonic anarchist-masonic conspiracy noised around 1900-1902? Were lodges reformed in the penal settlements? That too is plausible for several supervisors, especially a certain Francheschi among them, were registered members of the Grand Orient. Unfortunately, the records of the rue Cadet vanished during the second world war and so it is hard to clear up this point.

microbe might be the key... You will doubtless be able to get hold of it from friends in the Saint-Louis hospital...<sup>6</sup>

‘In the B. (Bonal) affair, I acted without deliberation, impulsively so to speak, I was so outraged... I have been the dupe of worthless blackguards. Bessolo is a Judas. I do all this so as to commit myself wholly to rebellion, and to avenge myself for all that they make me endure here... Seek out Maître Lafont.’

This letter reached its destination. It was almost entirely in code and speeded on its way secretly thanks to go-betweens. But another, almost similar, letter was seized from the linings of Alexandre’s jacket: this was the upshot of the sending of the revolvers. Spotting the label ‘lobsters’ on the boxes of conserves, one overly suspicious or unduly gluttonous warder had opened them. Faulx, alias Madelon, had copped 30 days in the hole for his pains. They knew that old Madelon, too worn-out by penal colony life to be capable of using a revolver, had been only the front man. They suspected that he was covering for somebody. But who might that somebody be if not his pal Jacob?

In the confiscated letter only the word ‘poison’ was fastened upon, and this was easily deciphered by the cipher bureau, despite the advances of the system based on the word ‘portuguese’. And so Jacob was suspected of planning to wipe out the entire population of the islands. Brownings, poison, indictment for homicide: all of this caused a ripple in the ministries. Memoranda flowed back and forth. A second investigation was begun into Marie, Madame Bouillot and Malato: Madame Bouillot was somewhat compromised. But still they had no conclusive evidence.

Moreover the court of cassation had just overturned the findings of the Special Maritime Tribunal. There was no going back on this decision. The case was to be heard again in Saint-Laurent. Fortunately. For otherwise...

In 1925 a reporter was to gain access to Jacob’s file. There he discovered, notably, this memorandum of 8 February 1910: ‘In short, Jacob is one of the most dangerous criminals in whom every fine sentiment has long since been extinguished. He will always be a definite danger to society whose declared enemy he remains. Any degree of clemency, especially were it to come some years after his arrest, would rightly be regarded as an act of regrettable weakness.’ Society was not given to turning the other cheek. Not disposed to letting its victims go. Or what remained of its victims. The humour in some of Alexandre’s letters cannot disguise the suffering he was feeling:

‘If one may raise doubts as to the remedial effect of this regimen, one should be able to cite the proof of its preventive effects. Thus, gifted with a Lacedaemonian power of recall, I do not believe that men have ever been subjected to more frugal sustenance. Might it be some resurrection of notions dear to Seneca, in the form of an alimentary Stoicism? That or something else, rest assured, my good lady, that my health is safe from any accident due to uric acid...’

A hive of activity revolved around him. He was hounded. They spied on him, took revenge on him. 15 days in the hole in November 1909 ‘for conversing in a loud voice by night in the special block.’ 8 days for ‘illicit correspondence’, after that coded message was uncovered. His body was stretched to breaking-point in the hope that his spirit would follow. Not that that stopped him from spelling out his wishes to the deportees on the islands. By means of Morse code, scraps of paper and whispered messages he kept in touch with the outside world. Commander Michel’s spies remained powerless: ‘Yes, they were an unsavoury lot,’ Michel writes, ‘but I was obliged

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<sup>6</sup> We shall see anon what this is about.

to avail of their services... I sensed that Jacob, locked up in his cell, was more of a danger than those braggarts who imposed their law upon the huts at knife-point... He had committed himself utterly to his battle against the administration... Had I been able to conclude a peace with him, I would have done so.'

But Jacob was not one to parley with the enemy: he fought.

The only concession he made, and that not without misgivings, was to take up the enemy's weapons, in order to turn them against him. Anyway, he had no choice in the matter. Unstintingly he counselled those with problems about what steps to take, what attitude to adopt, what line of argument to plead: 'It is fair to say that he rendered favours beyond number to the prison population thanks to his knowledge of the law,' writes Jean Normand, the qualified lawyer who fell in with him. 'Many a deportee and prisoner in the Iles du Salut are indebted to him for reductions in their sentences, and if many of them know how to go about defending themselves, then it is to him that they are indebted for the knowledge, and I most of all.'

Neither sabre strokes nor two doses of thornapple poison had got the better of him. Nor did the small glow of hunger manage to bow his head. He even refused to let Marie humiliate herself to no avail in petitions and overtures. He merely demanded his due, his right to a justice held in contempt: there was nothing else for it. But begging of anyone was out of the question: 'Dear Mother, I think I have told you already that I did not want to hear anything about favours. It is very much to be regretted that you did not bear that in mind. There are acrobatics and gymnastics for which I have no taste nor aptitude (...) Basically, you see, there is no point in relying upon this one's sponsorship or that one's influence. Better to rely only on oneself. Furthermore, it is also to be preferred that fortunate folk should not be annoyed by importuning. Even in the event of failure, this carries a commitment of indebtedness, and that feeling is often a hard cross to bear. For myself, I love my freedom too much to get bogged down in these sorts of commitments.'

On 13 April 1910, Ferrand and he again appeared before the Special Maritime Tribunal of Saint-Laurent. Their sentences were reduced to 2 years. Why this curious verdict when it had been accepted that they had acted in self defence? The 15 months they had just spent in leg-irons were wiped out by this decision. The two years were to be counted from this day forth...15 months, plus 24 months, making 39 in all. A lot for men in pain who appeared before the court laid out on stretchers. Again they appealed the verdicts.

The appeal was rejected. Marie tried to secure a pardon. But not to ensure her son's release. Only for the 2 years' punishment. Somewhat belatedly, Alexandre thanked her for her efforts from his cell on Royale island on 12 June 1910 and, out of embarrassment as well as to spare her worry, told her about his true circumstances:

'Dear mother, I have grave doubts that your health must not be the best: to be sure, after all that you have suffered, that is scarcely likely: but even so, I did not imagine you to be as ill as you have been. What can I tell you? That you did wrong to hide the fact from me, for, had I known I would not have burdened you with so many errands and tasks which may well have been the cause of your relapse. Finally if it is true, as you assure me, that you are on the road to recovery, that you are, so to speak, cured, so much the better. I ask nothing better than to believe you and I wish you better health in the future. As for me, I am happy to be able to reiterate to you what I told you in my last letter. I am well, very well (!). I received a bottle of Rocher powder and, while not giving it the credit for my improvement, I do believe it has made some little contribution towards it. For the moment, I have no further need of it. Unless I so ask you, send me nothing more: they would only confiscate it from me.'

Sometime at the beginning of this coming month, I expect to be transferred to the cells on Saint-Joseph island, there to serve the remainder of my sentence, which I will serve in full, unless your overtures are crowned with success, which is, moreover, likely if you acted as I recommended that you should. Deep down, I am none too pleased with this, but since it gives you pleasure and since, in a way, you have made overtures to those whom you deemed fit, do as you will: coming from you, it cannot but do good. (...) Above all, do not get confused: my sentence of hard labour for life is not the issue: the issue is the 2 years of incarceration in the cells pronounced by the Special Maritime Tribunal for premeditated assault and wounding leading unintentionally to death, account having been taken of lawful occasion and extenuating circumstances.

It is through an error that my dossier carries the mention—murder—or, rather, that it was the contention of the indictment: but the court did not accept it, and had it done so I should have been condemned to death. Moreover, if, as I hope, Maître Justal has consulted the file in the clerk's office of the Supreme Court, he must already have briefed you about this.

So let us wait. Whatever the decision may be, I cannot urge you too much not to upset yourself on my account. I say again, I am well and, my word, with health one can do and put up with lots of things.

In anticipation of your dear news, receive, my dear good lady, my most tender and affectionate caresses.'

In fact, his weight had fallen from 85 kilos to just 60 kilos.

Painful disappointment: Marie's application for a pardon was turned down: 'Jacob is one of the vilest individuals in the penal colony and undeserving of any interest being shown in him.' That crank Madame Jacob had wearied even the most patient souls with her tales of 'the sad life of her unfortunate child'! Had he not carried out burglaries, he would not be a deportee today. Then again, if she was so fond of him, what was to hinder her from going out there to join him!

And she decided to do just that. She would live in Cayenne. She would find employment as a dressmaker and, every Sunday, would take a boat to go see him. The idea was coolly received by Alexandre:

'Dear Mother, here I am, again disappointed in my waiting... Be that as it may, it is of no great importance. What is of greater importance is that your health is truly satisfactory. After all that you have gone through, my dear good lady, it is time that you were a little better. If only it might last.

Do not forget to transmit my sincere thanks to the people who tended you with such care: to Jeanne, to aunt, to your good neighbour lady above all, as well as the one with whom I am not acquainted<sup>7</sup>. Just as I would hate anyone who would do you harm, I cannot but love those who do you good, as you can imagine...

*If, instead of loving you as I do, more than anything in the world, I were to wish you dead, oh then, let it be soon! I would say to you! Come with all haste. But as I have no wish to be a matricide, as I want you to live as long a life as possible, then most sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, I beseech you to do nothing of the sort. For at your age, my good lady, with all the batterings you have taken from illnesses, you cannot be unaffected by such a climate, such a social milieu, such a lifestyle: you wouldn't survive it six months.*

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<sup>7</sup> 'Jeanne', 'aunt', 'neighbour lady' are all code names for the people whose aid Marie was seeking. 'Jeanne' was indubitably senator Flaissieres, who forwarded the appeal, and 'aunt' was Maître Aron, a lawyer who was beginning to take an interest in Jacob's lot.

That is what they have no doubt forgotten to tell you, and that is why I deem it proper to enlighten you...

However, we must not despair... The stumbling block in my case is the fear of my escaping, a fear which has been motivated, I must confess, by my past conduct<sup>8</sup>.

So that, if you were to seek some concession on my behalf, they could not fail to think, if not to reply, that the desire for such benefit is for me a means rather than an end.

That I might behave in the most exemplary fashion, and display the most compliant of attitudes would have no bearing on the matter. Invariably the answer would be a negative one. That is why I will never be released, that is why I will never leave these Iles du Salut...

If, thus far, I have sought to break free of my chains, it was only that I might live by your side... What does it matter to me whether I live in Rome or in Peking? The place makes no difference: what I have always wanted and what I will always want, is to live peaceably by your side, working as best I can...'

The second disappointment was more predictable: he was indeed to be brought before the Special Maritime Tribunal for making a mischievous complaint. As was Ferrand, who would also face an indictment for attempting to escape: 'The two biggest rogues in the colony attempted to mislead the Lord Chancellor. They must be brought to book.' Were he to be condemned to even one more year, he would not survive it. Dysentery was gnawing at him. It was not even certain that he would make it through these two years. Sometimes he fainted dead away. He was racked by attacks of delirium. How was he to prepare his defence in that dungeon when the screw was tramping back and forward across the grille above his head? He tried, even so, to collect the necessary testimony. This worked out as follows: November 1910, 8 days in the hole for gossiping; February 1911, 30 days in the hole for.. 'Noise. Gossiping. Incitement to tell lies before the disciplinary panel.'

It was through seeking a touch more freedom for men that he found himself at the bottom of that black hole. Mechanically he crushed the bugs surrounding him. He crumbled the bread crusts given to him into the rat-holes: with a little luck, he might contract leprosy. If he was leprous, they would take him out of there. And send him to the leper colony at Acaroyany. Whence he would be able to slip away... It all became so vague.

Finally, on 22 November 1911, unable to stand up, he appeared before the Tribunal in Saint-Laurent. He mustered what strength he had left. Argued his case. They did not listen to him. Suddenly, in the courtroom he spotted Captain Olive who had been in command of the *Maroni* on the day of Ferrand's escape attempt. Great care had been taken not to summon him as a witness. Yet the fellow had seen everything. In a flash, Jacob remembered another tribunal when he had been thirteen years old, one presided over by officers of integrity... He asked permission to have the captain testify. The court president could see no reason to deny him this request. Olive stepped up to the witness box. He spoke. Alexandre's ears buzzed.

Item by item, the captain endorsed what he had been saying. To everyone's amazement, Alexandre was acquitted. Ferrand was less fortunate: his desperate dive earned him a year in the cells. He would not be emerging again. This was the last Alexandre saw of him.

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<sup>8</sup> Not that Alexandre had abandoned his plans. But the letter had to get past the censor.

Back to the cells. Dysentery. 'The men took turns to wash out the WC, with water they carried from a large sink, but with a can which they used to drink from, with dirty hands.'<sup>9</sup> Letters from Marie. She slipped some dried flowers inside.

'Goodness! If that carries on you'll end up slipping a plane tree into your letters! Of course I am delighted to get letters from you. But why kill these flowers?...

An army physician passing through the island was startled and horrified to see the straits to which the fellow confined to his cell had been reduced. He asked that he be removed to hospital. Some hope. The director refused: a convict under punishment was not to be tended. Alexandre asked for some condensed milk at least. This was refused by a second doctor, the first having moved on. Anyway, there was no milk to be had. Not for him. He wrote to his mother to get her to seek permission of the ministry for the Colonies to send him some. Request denied: 'The health service of the penal establishment devotes all the care that could be wished to the condition of the sick. Rest assured that if the prisoner needed milk, he would be supplied with some then and there.'

In spite of everything, however, Marie's solicitations were not in vain. The reply from here was seized en route and shown to doctor number two. Perhaps the latter had a sudden fear of a scandal being whipped up in the leftist press in France should Jacob, whom his friends appeared not to have forgotten, die for want of attention. He condescended to remove the ailing Jacob to a cell in the infirmary and at last to give him some of that saving milk. Another few days or so, and it would have been too late and no mistake.

For a long time yet Alexandre languished in the nightmarish shadows of delirium. The milk restored a little of his strength. But his returning strength made him hungry and the hunger tormented him. One by one, he winkled out the pellets of dried and mouldy bread which his predecessors had used to stop up the bug holes along the walls. And ate them. Occasionally he stumbled across unlikely titbits: a toad which had lost its way: a fricassee of green bananas in grease scraped from an axle... From time to time, he had a clear sensation of his life ebbing away. He lost 42 kilos, a little under half of his normal body weight.

Then life, persistent, returned to his carcass. And with it, the taste for freedom. When the nightmare ended in May 1912 after almost 4 years in the cell or in the hole, emaciated, shaking, by which time the authorities reckoned him a broken man, his goal had not altered: *escape*. He had learned a lot about himself. He had been very close to death. Their flirtation had not scared him. Instead, his brush with death had led to his reflecting upon the meaning of his undertakings previous to then. By now their fiery utopianism struck him as a little premature.

July 1912. Commandant Michel had had a sentry box installed at the gates, to shelter the duty guards from torrential downpours. What if it were to be converted for use as a boat? Water-proofed with a sealant, fitted with a keel, with a plank fixed crosswise for the mast and another by way of a rudder, it might well stand up to the Atlantic swell.

One moonless night, 5 men slipped out of the Red Hut. They inched their way to the jetty. Alas! The patrols were unceasing and warder Simon spotted their silhouettes. Jacob was at their head. Simon drew his revolver, emptied his chamber at him, but missed. The alarm was raised. Alexandre raced back to the hut. When the turnkeys and warders burst in with guns at the ready, he was already snoring in his plank-bed, as were two of his confederates. The other pair had been

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<sup>9</sup> Mireille Maroger Bagne, 1933.



caught. They would not name names. As for the 60 convicts there present, they had never seen or heard a thing.

Although Simon could not prove Alexandre's involvement, commandant Michel nonetheless had him isolated. By night he was to sleep in a cell, with feet shackled. By day he was to attend to his normal tasks. But a turnkey assigned to dog his footsteps was to prevent his communicating with anyone. There was no official record of his being punished. And so this time convict 34477 would not be able to invoke such and such an article of the regulations, nor raise any scandal, as he was wont to do, with the ministers. The method was unorthodox, maybe, but astute.

October 1912. Alexandre had managed, by letter, to come to some accommodation with a nurse and an *assigné*—a convict seconded to a private household as a servant—both of whom were comparatively free in their movement. They had stolen an ancient, half-rotted canoe and stockpiled the wherewithal for an escape. But had not managed to contrive solutions to a thousand specifically maritime technical problems. Item by item, Alexandre gave them the proper pointers. In return, so that he might join them they were to help him slip out of his cell by knocking the warder senseless.

The night set for the expedition arrived. The hours ticked by. No sign of them. Having availed of his expertise, they had in fact reckoned that they had no further use for him. Things went badly for them. Their ship capsized. The following day, they were recaptured.

Alexandre would almost have been glad, had not his letters and sketches been seized among their effects. An inquiry was begun. His complicity seemed beyond doubt. Michel rubbed his hands: now he had him, and without his having had to lift a finger.

But he had not taken due account of his inventive mind. He dispatched a messenger to the two conspirators. The latter were to state that they had received a final letter from him in which he had pulled out of the expedition. They agreed to this. Later, the same messenger stole a compass from among the prosecution evidence seized on board the skiff.

When the deputy prosecutor questioned Alexandre, the latter swore that he had pulled out of the scheme at the last moment. His last letter was proof of that.

'But Jacob, when all is said and done, that letter does not exist!'

'It must exist, since I wrote it. All of this is just another setup designed to encompass my downfall.'

'That is possible, but I charge you with complicity in the escape attempt. You can explain this contention of yours, which does not hold up, before the Special Maritime Tribunal.'

And so, on 17 January 1913, Jacob appeared for his fourth time before the magistrates in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni. No one would have given a farthing for his chances. There he doggedly clung to his defence. They did not believe him. The better to illustrate the seriousness of the escape bid, the prosecution counsel had a list of the exhibits read out. Alexandre immediately requested permission to speak.

'You mentioned a compass. I see no such compass.'

They searched for it. Amazement. He was right.

'There is the proof that this is a setup!' he cried. 'Someone stole my last letter in order to compromise me. But upon seeing the compass, that someone could not resist snatching it too!'

It was truly bizarre. His outrage seemed authentic. Even a convict could not be condemned on such flimsy evidence. Then again, there was the precedent of the false testimony of camp commander Raymond... In short, they resigned themselves to an acquittal.

Not that that prevented commandant Michel from keeping him in semi-custody in the cells. For, between that aborted escape and the trial, a further attempt had occurred. And the director of the islands had learnt of it through his narks.

A locker containing rifles and ammunition had been installed in the office of the dock supervisor. Alexandre had decided to seize them. The plan seemed relatively straightforward. Six of the most reliable accomplices had been recruited. They would slip out of their hut and wait for him outside his cell.

Alexandre would slip out of his chains—child's play for him—and open the door thanks to a mysterious arrangement of picklocks and strings which had already been tried out and which worked to perfection. Should a warder appear, they were to knock him out. Then they would creep as far as the dock supervisor's post. He would be rendered harmless and stripped of his clothing. Alexandre would don his uniform: the Lebel rifles would be seized and they would climb into a whaler, ready to open fire at the first sign of the alarm's being raised. The steamer from Cayenne, the *Oyapock*, which put into port between 11.00 pm. and midnight, would be at anchor in the port. With the aid of the uniform, they would be allowed aboard without difficulty. Within 5 minutes, the crew would have been dumped overboard, the anchor weighed and the engines given full throttle. And then it would be off to Brazil!

The scheme was an exhilarating one, perfectly practicable for people who would stop at nothing.

Unfortunately, a silly mishap, a grain of sand had prevented this magnificent scheme's being put into effect. A real grain of sand, which had found its way into the lock on the cell door and which rendered the string arrangement useless. Robbed of their leader, realising that they themselves were incapable of pulling it off without him, his six confederates, vexed, made their way back to their hut. All save two, who were picked up by a patrol and who received 30 days in the hole for their pains. As for Alexandre, after tongues were loosened, they had had his cell searched by a specialist, but nothing had been found. No hint of evidence. From that day forth, the commandant was inclined to look upon Alexandre as a formidable sorcerer...

December 1913. Marie was again insisting that she should journey out to join him. 'Let me tell you that I want to hear no more talk of a trip to Guyane. Why not accommodate yourself to the truth, dismal though that may be? Why burden yourself with illusions?... Why upset yourself, good lady: you are moving a little too fast. They are not going to release me... We can avail nothing against the *fait accompli*... As for coming out here to plunge yourself into this Hell...'

January 1914. A fortnight in the hole for malicious innuendo in his letters to his mother.

Time passed. And lay heavy on his hands. His spirits improved a little. This was written on 2 July 1914.

'My good lady, your photo came as a surprise and a pleasant one at that. You always look the same to me. But your poor eyes must often have filled with tears. They speak of much suffering. And that is what we must avoid, what we must kick against. Things are as they may and should be: they are as life's destiny and we ourselves have made them. Life is a war, and the social contest is a battle without pity or quarter and whenever one is defeated, one should not be shedding tears: one should get a grip of oneself. We have to overcome this undercurrent of nihilism within us, and keep right on to the end, vigorously and scornful of death.

I am very happy that you have taken these ideas on board a little, for such is the impression I get from your latest letter...

Banish affliction from your heart. It is an effect of ignorance and religiosity rather than a positive reply to questions. What good does it do! Since that is how it is, it cannot be otherwise. If it were possible, it would be so. What the devil! There are occasions when one must have courage, the steadfast courage to come out categorically with a statement, or else there is nothing for it any more but to slap ourselves in the face. Must we accept contempt of self? Never.

Of my own circumstances I shall say nothing to you; you would scurry right and left again and that would be supremely displeasing to me. Ask nothing, accept nothing: that gives the measure of what we are entitled to claim for ourselves. No compromise. Each on his own ground.

My health is not bad. In fact I have had some attacks of palpitations and mortification of the bones has been bothering me a little, but it is bearable. I have borne lots of other things...

Best wishes from me, and to your good neighbour lady and the comrades.'

Saturday 1 August 1914. The general mobilisation order goes up on walls all over Paris. The first units soon set off westwards, a flower in their rifle barrels, to teach the *Boche* a lesson. In anarchist circles all was debacle. The lovely ideas which dated from the 1904 International Anti-Militarist Association when Malato had so blatantly taken issue with Darien<sup>10</sup> had failed to withstand the impact with reality. The renegade Gustave Hervé noted: 'Our wings snapped upon collision with hard facts and there we were brought down to earth again, each on his native soil with, for the moment, a single preoccupation... with defending it as our ancestors had done.'

They had deluded themselves with high hopes. But on both sides of the frontier, the spirit of patriotism outstripped internationalist sentiment. On 1 August *La Bataille syndicaliste*, organ of the CGT, urged in eight-point type 'Proletarians of every land, unite!' but by 3 August it had joined the clan of the warmongers, headed by almost every one of the movement's leaders, including Griffuelhes and Léon Jouhaux who, ..oh the shame of it!.. won plaudits from Maurice Barrès: the Interior minister, Malvy, did not even need to proceed with the strict enforcement of the provisions of 'List B' which provided for the imprisonment of socialists, authoritarians and libertarians alike, in the event of mobilisation. The thesis of revolutionary spontaneity melted away. Most anarchists joined with the authoritarians in their warmongering. Virtually alone, Sébastien Faure stood his ground. Louis Lecoin and his pal Pierre Ruff were thrown in prison. Benoît, Girard, and the occasional other revolutionary syndicalist, Monatte included (who resigned from the CGT and was soon to be dispatched to the front lines) were to re-group in Zimmerwald. The position in Germany was the same. Isolated, Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg struggled in vain. Moreover from March 1915 on, the former was to find himself at the front, and the latter in prison. In England there were three or four diehards. In Italy, four or five Malatestas. As for the rest...

The Russian émigrés, Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks alike, were raring to go. Trotsky soon smoothed over his differences with Lenin: according to him, this war was a ghastly and necessary evil. The Kaiser and the Tsar were going to be swept away. Out of the ruins of their regimes socialism would at last be able to sprout forth. Kropotkin talked of a 'war in defence of freedom.' 'We will have to defend ourselves like savage beasts,' he said. 'The crushing of France would be a blow to civilisation... Let us make the social revolution and let us fly to the borders...' In February 1916 there appeared the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, which was a summons to battle against Pan-German authoritarianism, whether socialist or military, just as Bakunin in days gone by had done battle against Marx. At the foot of this document were to be found the signatures of Jean Grave, Doctor Pierrot and Paul Reclus. And of Malato.

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<sup>10</sup> Apropos of this, see Darien's *La Belle France*.

Soon, the proletariat of every land were killing one another for the greater profit of the armaments salesmen, to applause from most socialist leaders. Deep in his prison cell, Lecoin was in despair. Marie raged against the savagery of the Teuton. She sent wild letters to her son. But the ordeals he had gone through, what he had read, his fearful loneliness, his constant fight to survive against the Administration as well as the hoodlums who, mingled with the anarchists, populated Saint-Joseph ('You cannot credit the extent of malevolence and cowardliness of most of these Marseillaise known as *apaches*. They form a sort of 'Mafia' and have respect for nothing except a good hiding')... all of this led Jacob progressively to drift away from ideologies, whatever these might be. Change the world? A fine dream: twenty years ago, he had believed in it. Now he was 35 years old, and 10 of those years had been spent in penal servitude. He renounced nothing of what he had done. He stood ready to acknowledge it in its entirety and would do so unto death. But he would no doubt not begin again. Not in the same fashion. Slowly he had evolved. The individualism of Stirner and Nietzsche had taken the place of Hugo's socialism and libertarian messianism. Change the world? Make revolution? Establish a classless society, without exploiters or exploited? It was first and foremost human nature that needed changing. All causes boiled down to the same thing, and what was called The Cause was no exception. Values were rooted in the individual Ego. Patriotism? Just another value among the many. Why would he espouse France's hatred of Germany when it was France that had brought him to his present circumstances? He felt for no country, no nation. He was Alexandre Jacob. And had irons on his legs.

In Guyane, the most visible upshot of this scientifically organised slaughter, the slow hatching of which had been sensible for twenty years past, with the proclamations, parades, reviews, Agadir, Alsace-Lorraine and the posturing, was that provisions became scarcer and correspondence less regular. And also commandant Michel departed for France with a great fanfare to earn some stripes and decorations. Marie enfolded herself in the tricolour. She got a cool reception: 'What's that you say? The Beast? Barbarians? But all groups and all individuals alike do as much. There is no sign of justice in history. Might is right. Biologically the feeling is a blight, a canker, the most noxious of blemishes. And if one is to believe certain writings, they say that the Germans are guitar serenaders, dreaming of little blue flowers! Put your trust in reputations! True, in addition to Schiller, Goethe and Madame de Staël, there was Stirner and Nietzsche: these were indicative of a different trend. I am not an anti-militarist, for the very reason that society cannot exist without defenders or attackers according to the circumstances, but I am not a patriot for this other reason, that I cannot be a patriot as I have no patrimony. The word is not enough for me, I need the things as well... Life is a war. Whether one fights for a word, an idea, flag, some prosaic interest or some ideological interest, whether one be a Sancho Panza or a Don Quixote, one always has to strike or be struck. There is no way around it. It is not about to change.'

Marie did not pay him any heed. The Huns were on the rampage. They had to be stopped on pain of death. And one would go to one's death if need be to stop them.

Passions were heating up in the islands, too. Surreptitiously, pages from two-month old newspapers were doing the rounds in the huts. Some believed there was a vague hope to be read between the lines of them... Since all able-bodied men were being dispatched to the trenches, why not them? Nothing could be worse than this Hell they were stuck in. Fighting, killing, running the risk of being killed... that was living. So it was said. They were going to be sent to the front in disciplinary battalions, they would be entrusted with the most perilous missions and few of them would be coming back, but those who did survive would have their sentences reduced in

a euphoria of victory. And of course every man Jack of them reckoned that he would be among the survivors.

Despite himself, such rumours stirred Alexandre.. 'And so the tragedy goes on and doubtless will until no resources are left. Here views of varying degrees of accuracy, it goes without saying, are always arriving. For the moment and saving the intervention of new factors, which is a possibility, Paris does not seem threatened. As far as I am concerned that is the essential point, on your account. Shown no pity myself, how can you expect me to show any towards others? Then again I fail to see grounds for compassion. Isn't dying with weapon in hand the most beautiful thing, the most sublime of sensations? The whole question of subjectivism and metaphysics aside, they are to be envied and not entitled to complain. What is sad, what is pitiful and supremely deplorable is the ongoing suicide, this gradual death, drop by drop which goes under the name of the quiet life, the monkish existence of Capuchins, slugs and convicts..'

Insidiously, the idea took hold. For the past 9 years the urgent thing had been to escape this sluggish existence. Then again, there was pressure from every side. The deportees of the whole of Guyane had long since abandoned the Phrygian cap and the Marseillaise to concern themselves with the war only. Their eyes lit up as soon as the topic was raised. A few had taken their own lives, having despaired already of ever being sent to Flanders. He... who could write so well... he must send a petition to the minister for the Colonies on behalf of the detainees of Saint-Joseph:

'Go to it, Jacob, do it..'

In the end he obliged. Four full large-format pages of cramped writing. He set out every possible argument. Redemption of convicts, the desperate honour of giving one's life for one's country. And there was no threat to public order. Quite the contrary, they were to be sent off to die in the tightest corners. Instead of being a force for wrongdoing, their physical courage was to be directed against the enemy, which is to say, towards the national good. France had no right to turn away well-meaning trench-diggers. The Foreign Legion was not made up of choirboys, exactly. —When all was said and done, it was not too much of an effort to get himself to write the request. Indeed the worst of punishments was the feeling of uselessness while one still retained some modicum of energy.

On her side, Marie implored the Lord Chancellor to show him clemency, he being so good. She gave an innocent, heartfelt description of him, all naivety and faith, as if her mother love was argument enough to shake the pillars of the Palace of Justice, as if the stones might be moved by sincerity. Precisely the sort of overtures which made Alexandre dissatisfied as soon as he learned of them.

*'Monsieur le Ministre,*

*It is a poor woman who comes to make her plea before you on behalf of her child, for my most ardent wish is to see him alongside his brethern fighting for right and justice against barbarism... I beseech you, show some word of forgiveness for my poor little one who is of an upright nature, courageous and energetic: do not let him perish purposelessly...*

*He has been a prisoner for 12 years now, 9 of them in Guyane, in the Iles du Salut. As you are aware, he cannot go on living there for many more years. The regime and the climate are murderous. He is a rebel, but when one is young one is ardent and fiery and one's ideas are very often shaped by certain literature. My son never took a life: yet he has been sentenced to imprisonment for life.*

*I beseech you, Monsieur le Ministre, whom I hold to be just and good, to set aside partisan hatreds when reading his dossier, which is grossly inaccurate in places: for my son, a common law prisoner, has very often been looked upon as a political prisoner. This has never been taken account of. To this day, he is as he was that first day eleven years ago: his lot has not been amended, not even a change of category, nothing. Yet he has been there the required period to obtain it, but he has been granted nothing, and has never been shown any clemency. (...)*

*Perhaps my son is taken to task for not having let himself be caught up in the current which exists in the penal settlement environment: that unreserved submissiveness which makes a good convict. I cannot go into an explanation: it would take too long: but when one is a man, in whatever context one may find oneself, even if it be deportation, one retains one's dignity as a man and that is why (I know that my son has never had any shortcomings in the regard) I say to you, Monsieur le Ministre, without any pretence, that my son is a man. And in this dark hour which is nonetheless filled with the light of hope, France has need of all his energies. I issue one last cry of hope and beseech you, Monsieur le Ministre, to spare a thought for my poor child who is slowly dying. If he must perish in battle, let it be for justice and for the most blessed of all rights: liberty.'*

The reply was dry, brutal. No. Convicts were not wanted on French soil. They were undeserving of the honour of defending a country which rejected them. Society would not afford them even that generosity. Alexandre was not surprised by the outcome of his mother's overtures... 'You, good lady, make this issue the navel of the world whereas these leaders have other irons in the fire... Do not fret needlessly. We have done what we could, honestly and without ulterior motives... It matters little what others may or may not think...

When, like us, one comes to the twilight of one's life and, upon searching one's conscience, one can candidly assert that one has never betrayed anyone and has always honoured one's given word, that far outweighs the pointless approbation of others. Without honour, I would not reckon that life was worth the trouble of living...

Best wishes to all, and to you, my good lady, my tenderest, most affectionate caresses.'

1916. In February, German attack on Verdun. In May, a naval engagement off Jutland. The fortress of Vaux was captured in June. In July came the Somme offensive. Zeppelins exploded. Galleani died. Nivelle was appointed generalissimo. Louis Lecoin languished in La Santé. And the *League de Droits de L'Homme* lobbied on convict Jacob's behalf but to no avail.

Having, in his frustration, come close to dynamiting the *Maroni* with governor of Guyane, the director of the penal settlement and the prosecutor general on board, a fine firework display aborted on account of the cartridges being too damp regret at not having seen the sharks devour these other sharks, but also, all things considered, a splendid absurdity averted, Alexandre had Marie send him a thousand five hundred francs, two revolvers, a canvass and what would later come to be known as 'Mae West', all of them addressed to a convict by the name of Firbus who was due to be assigned to a plot in Saint-Laurent quite soon. To open Firbus's mind, Alexandre loaned him his Stirnerite bible *The Ego and His Own*. Firbus, who had never opened the book in his life took the text literally. He took this plea on behalf of the Ego to heart as a justification of all acts of selfishness and betrayal—and so many others had done so before, just as the Nazis

were later to cite Nietzsche in their self-justification—and went on to keep the money and gear for himself.

Let down for the umpteenth time, Alexandre despaired of his chances of making a collective escape. Henceforth, not even Dieudonné, the anarchist carpenter from Nancy, implicated in the Bonnot Gang episode and with whom Jacob had been friendly since his arrival in 1913 would have any association with his schemes. And now, with the daring that comes of despair, he played his last card.

One October night in 1917, having sawed through the bars of his cell, he threw himself into the water. For want of his 'Mae West' he had attached floats to his ankles, waist and shoulders. He had also kitted himself out with a paddle. But he had no revolver, no drinking water, and little money in his stash. His aim was to paddle around the island, go ashore in some uncultivated area, build himself a raft and put out again from there. The sharks? Anything was better than the daily grind of convict life. Anyway, he met up with none, but instead encountered a current stronger than he had suspected. The sea was icy. The swell lashed his face. Eddies swept him along. He passed out.

When he came to it was to see that he had been washed ashore only a few metres from his point of departure. Dawn was breaking. There was no way to make it back to his quarters without being caught. So he stripped off his gear, took out his stash and swallowed a huge dose of morphine chlorhydrate... the famous poison which Marie had secured from the Saint Louis hospital and concerning which he had read in some science book that it produced a deathlike condition. Before collapsing into catalepsy, he went off to slump on the rocks a little further off.

They found him, took him to the hospital and thence to the morgue. He had anticipated this, in the event of the failure of the attempted escape with the floats. He intended to use the following night to saw through a bar, retrieve his sail, machete and ropes (hidden under a rock) and build a raft.

But he had overdone the morphine. The paralysis lasted until 24 hours later, by which time it was daylight, and an attendant was on duty in the morgue. He was overcome by an uncontrollable nervous trembling. Again he was removed to the hospital. The doctor prodded his stomach, gave him an enema and in his stash discovered a trace of the morphine chlorhydrate. Alexandre came to, only to be removed once more to a cell in the infirmary.

For a fortnight his body rejected all food. For a fortnight he was delirious. He was assailed by the ghastliest, most realistic nightmares a human being can have. He raved in his sleep. His insides were filled with rumbling monsters that gnawed at his brain. He felt himself going mad.

The deputy prosecutor questioned him: Alexandre pleaded attempted suicide. What is more, on the very night on which these incidents had taken place, another convict by the name of Soccodato who had attempted to break out in the company of three turnkeys, had been murdered by them. Alexandre seized upon this coincidence: he was to have joined Soccodato, he claimed. But he was ignorant of the turnkeys' presence. When he learned of it, he had reckoned that the boat in which the escape was to have been made would not be able to take five men. So he had given up his place and then, despairing, had attempted to end his own life. Furthermore an article of the regulations prescribed that twelve hours' absence from one's place of detention could not be deemed an escape attempt.

Not believing a word of the story, the deputy prosecutor took good note of it all. The new director, Crucioni, once informed flew into a mad rage and awarded him 30 days' confinement to cells for making a false statement.

On 10 April 1918 the Special Maritime Tribunal to which he had been referred did not believe him either and sentenced him to two years in the cells.

On the basis of a paragraph from the regulations relating to absences of under twelve hours' duration... one that even the judges were not conversant with... he appealed: on 1 August, the supreme court pronounced in his favour, it remained only to face the Maritime Tribunal once again.

Be that as it may, the good news gave him new strength for he was once again on the point of death. 'Do you remember when I told you that I was getting on like a baobab tree? Alas the baobab tree has turned into a weeping willow! When I walk you'd think I was a circumflex accent in search of a vowel to roost on!' Weakened by so many years in detention, sapped by the poison he had swallowed, he had to be operated on on 12 May for haemorrhoids: 'I've had to make up my mind to go into dry-dock. Refitted on the 12th my bilge hasn't been caulked properly'...

They operated a second time. His body was excavated, his belly ballooned: he could no longer stand upright. His muscles turned to jelly. His bones all but poked through his skin. Tuberculosis of the bones was diagnosed. A third operation, which at least led to his being taken from his cell into the hospital where he spent six months. The *apache* Manda, one-time lover of Casque d'or, and sentenced to hard labour in 1902 and since promoted infirmary attendant, scarcely spared him. How was he able to survive such treatment? Mystery. But recover he did.

'Blessed lady, you are very wrong to upset yourself on my account. You think me miserable and I am much less miserable than you think. Misery is not the product of circumstances, but rather of one's approach to them. And it is precisely because I see things in a different light from most mortals that I am less unhappy in a dungeon than many folk are in their drawing rooms. At the present moment my blood has been rejuvenated, my nerves are solid and my flesh hard. Good seed, they say, never turns mouldy. That, no doubt, is why, although I have been bottled up for years in the dungeons of the penal colony, I am nonetheless not worm-eaten. I keep right on, come what may... I let myself die at the rate of 1 milligramme per day: so, you see, I am not ready yet to give up the ghost... what is an evil for weak natures is instead a boon to stronger natures'...

On 31 March 1919, the Special Tribunal, reconsidering, acquitted him once and for all: regulations are regulations. If he was to be believed, no escape attempt had in fact taken place.

On 10 April, by way of making up for this, director Crucioni awarded him 12 days in the cells: since there had been no escape bid, there must at least have been absence without leave. Alexandre complained to the minister: how dare the director penalise him in defiance of the findings of the court of appeal and the Special Tribunal? On 11 November the Armistice was signed with Germany. In December, amid the joy of victory, a general amnesty was awarded to all petty offenders: Alexandre benefited by this. He had won. Not that those twelve days mattered a damn to him: anyway, he had already served most of them when the news reached Royale island. But since December 1917 he had not incurred any penalties under the law. His prison record had been without blemish for more than 18 months.

In his finest hand, he drafted an application for reclassification as a prisoner first class. On receipt of it, the director choked. He had Alexandre brought to his office.

'Jacob, this jape has gone on long enough. You saw through bars, build rafts, take poison, maintain a climate of revolt in camp, succeeded in putting one over on the Special Tribunal, and you imagine that you're about to be promoted to prisoner first class!'



‘Monsieur le Directeur, regulations are regulations,’ said Alexandre. ‘If you see fit to refuse my application I can forward it to the Ministry’...

Despite an extremely unfavourable report from Crucioni (‘The prisoner does not seem to have mended his ways sufficiently to be the object of such a proposal’) on 1 April 1920, after 79 months penal servitude, 43 of them spent confined to the cells or in the hole, convict 34477 was promoted prisoner first class. Now he could be taken on as a servant by some family, eat somewhat better and enjoy comparatively greater freedom. It was hardly the grand thing of a concession—that being a favour which the ministry would undoubtedly never award to him—but, after 17 years of incarceration, it was a victory. True, after the failure of 17 escape attempts the Iles du Salut had also proved that they did not easily surrender their prey. So, was he to have to resign himself to ending his days out there?

### III

*“Iles du Salut—December 1920.*

*My dear good lady,*

*You strive to console me and to prepare me for the results of your overtures, as if I have yet to reach the age of reason. Needless self-torment is misery.*

*Do not put yourself out on my account, dear good lady. Like the devil I have become a hermit and, though my lonely retreat may be strewn with long thorns, I am able even so, to sample great and healthy intellectual delights there. Willingly to saddle oneself with some imperative ‘thou shalt’s’, to laugh where others weep, to bear indigence with pride, indeed to seek it while feeling ashamed of shame, that is what living is all about and, if need be, it can make a virtue of knowing how to die. To grasp the absolute pointlessness of things and in spite (indeed, on account) of this, to conclude that it is all the more pointless to speak of pointlessness. In this clash of ideas, Ecclesiastes has it right: ‘Better a live mite than a dead elephant’. Anything else is just so much empty chatter. So, my dear good lady, do not vex yourself over trifles. We no longer live in wondrous times when walls come tumbling down to a fanfare of trumpets. Today, thousand-kilo shells are used for that purpose. Such is the eloquence of our day. And so I have to tell you that a common supplication, whatever it may be founded on, and whatever its sincerity, could not overcome the prejudices of an entire people...’*

At first Alexandre was seconded for 18 months to the home of an army overseer, chief-adjutant Pascalini. This fellow was of Corsican origin like most of his colleagues but unlike them he was not overly brutal nor unduly bloodthirsty. Next he was assigned to the household of a Monsieur Abric, a peaceable and generous native of Bordeaux, a ‘franchised agent in colonial goods’. There he was almost happy. He did the housework and washed the dishes; he did the washing, sewing, ironing and also served at table. It was paradise or something akin to it.

He had suffered so many mishaps and his health had been so undermined that now he felt the need to recover a little. His reclassification as a prisoner first class could be up for annual review. Any further mishap, any suspicious act and any abortive attempt would be catastrophic.

Anyway, he did not have to worry. For the past 4 years a project had been turning over in his head: a plan to write a book on criminology. In his rare moments of leisure, he had already

amassed heaps of notes. He had consulted every work one might need on the subject. In all, he encountered the same aberrations: 'Just as an ant might greet this or that assertion by some naturalist with Homeric laughter, so the criminologists' deductions can appear audacious to the criminal'. Having rubbed elbows with all sorts of lawbreakers imaginable, the gulf between the theories, the writings and the reality stood out clearly to him. What he himself had endured was a telling example of society's attitude to those whom it adjudged harmful. A recounting of the suffering undergone, suffering about which he never complained moreover, and which had helped shape the man he had become might undoubtedly help some to comprehend the realities. Change the world? Jacob was decidedly not on that tack any longer. While he in his dungeon had not the wherewithal to do that, nobody else had either: what he had picked up on the grapevine about the Russian revolution of October 1917 and its evolution after 1919, struck him as quite illuminating. Had it really been worth robbing the bank in Tiflis merely to arrive at the dictatorship of bureaucrats over the proletariat? On a more modest scale, he wanted to offer his testimony concerning certain shady machinations of that industrial civilisation which he had once so presumptuously attacked. A report on the hidden part of the iceberg.

The crux of the penal question was the notion (a monstrosity of hypocrisy and cynicism) that the criminal was some sort of exceptional being, with 'honest folk' making up the majority. The reverse was true. Everyone could be taken to task for at least a few offences, betrayals, thefts, swindles, acts of treachery, lies—even crimes, albeit perhaps only through indifference. Saints, pure souls, and angels there were none. Folk called honest had simply had luck on their side: they had not been caught. Or else they had subtly made use of the protection of the law, or else their personal cowardice and maybe the generous and understanding influence of parents and friends had deterred them from committing too many mistakes; or indeed maybe family connections had smoothed over their difficulties. In short, one encountered fewer daddy's boys hauled before the courts than inner city kids.

Or to put it a better way, at the basis of all wealth lay crime. In days gone by it was the nobles butchering the serfs; now it was the captains of industry starving out their workers, Rockefeller ruining his rivals, when not having them slain by his henchmen, Rothschild building his success upon a few hundred thousand deaths. Who, other than Monsieur Schneider or Monsieur Renault was culpable when an employee dies of tuberculosis due to malnutrition, whilst he himself possessed four châteaux? And wars, those supposedly irrational phenomena, were they not deliberate butchery ordered by the few's will to power?

That left the ill-starred, the ones whom society rejected in a gesture of outraged dignity, those whom the courts and respectable folk dubbed most especially criminals. Some were flawed, degenerates who ought not to have been allowed to live—a tiny minority whose proper place was not in the penal colony nor in the prison, but in the asylum (like the Grand Chiquet who baited his lines with the corpses of children): the rest made up the mob of the unloved: a father who drank, a mother who sang in the streets, a filthy hovel, disgrace sensed at 5 years of age, humiliation at 10, no schooling, 'bad company' who shared his thirst for vengeance, the force of circumstance. As long as some children grew up to be lords and others dressed in hand-me-down clothes, jealousy would continue to exist.

But Jacob, now 40, henceforth fought shy of all generalisations: that had cost him too dear. He merely wanted to talk about the millions of cases with which he was conversant and to explain them. To use his own words, he was to employ, an 'experimental method' (or an empirical one,

to be more precise). He was to set out the facts side by side and leave it to them, unaided, to do battle with preconceived notions.

If social equality at birth was a utopian dream, society could at least compensate for the ill-luck of the least favoured by offering an *authentically* democratic education. By allowing every common journeyman's access to the Polytechnique just like the offspring of the foreman or the office employee. A shepherd born in Boulloc, a village of 500 souls in the Aveyron, the son of a housewife born in Rueil, see their future blocked by a series of obstacles which are all the more insurmountable for being concealed. Free and compulsory education for all was a start: but it remains a snare.

Out of bravado an adolescent steals a bicycle: and gets caught. Hardly the work of a big-time criminal. But he will nonetheless be sent to prison. There, he will be subjected to abuse by the 'screws': he will be given an insight into the prestige of uniformed toughs. And emerge worse than when he went in. And go on to become a recidivist.

And even if the culprit should, by some miracle, admit his wrongdoing or at least concede the inadvisability of his actions, even should he honestly 'repent', in the vast majority of instances he will not be able to find any more employment, *decent* employment at any rate, once released. He will be on the wrong side of the law and forever *marked*. Instead of re-educating, rehabilitating or trying to redeem the guilty, they are punished. That no doubt represents a saving in the national budget under the column of prisons and prison staff. But how can one calculate the waste of energy which it represents for the country, the amount of damage done by persons systematically steered into becoming criminals and who, sometimes, have only become so through being less spineless than the rest?

Such *apaches*—today we would say gangsters—of whom Alexandre complained so bitterly in the penal settlement had undoubtedly gone beyond all redemption. But only because they had been driven down that road. And any who might be susceptible of rehabilitation, were systematically prevented by every means from mending their ways. There were the concessions granted most stingily: 150 in the whole of 1920, for 6000 prisoners. There was the absurdity, the deliberate pointlessness of the work; there was the lot of the banished ones the 'beggars-door-to-door' like Baudy or Bonnefoy—worse, maybe, than the lot of the deportees proper: no money, no chance of earning any, they were condemned to die ('burn out' would be more accurate) or to escape. There was the law of doubles which stated that a man sentenced to less than 8 years' penal servitude had to serve a term of banishment equal to the period he spent in custody. There was the fate of those freed on the spot after having served their double... these too were denied, in a number of ways, the chance of finding employment and had no way of paying their passage home to France and so were consigned to sink into alcoholism, perversion, agony and death.

There were the dying victims of banishment loaded aboard the railway cars in Cayenne until the buffeting hastened their death. There was the case of Roussenq, sentenced to 20 years' penal servitude, plus a double, for having set his mattress alight one day while serving with the disciplinary battalions in Africa. There was that sergeant-major of the colonial infantry sentenced to 30 years for stealing 250 francs and who had gone blind. There was *Charvein*, the camp for so-called 'incurables' where the screws organised knife fights to the death between prisoners over.. an apple. On every side there was the squalor against which the 'decent folk' veiled their faces. The Goya-esque example of Guyane was telling. The convicted man was the alibi of the unconvicted one in his considering himself an honest man. The convict reassured decent folk as to their own integrity, which may have been more apparent than real.

Jacob had spelled all of this out clearly a little later on in a letter to Maître Lafont, the erstwhile lawyer of Ader. Lafont had since become a deputy: 'You ask me by what right I concern myself with prison business? Why, by the right of qualification. Don't you think that if starlings could speak they would be ideally qualified to talk about cages and aviaries? Haven't I suffered both imprisonment and isolation these 25 years, 2 months and 8 days? Albeit with my very slender resources, I am of a mind to help in any improvement of prison practices so as to ease and sweeten the lot of my brothers in misery..

I know what is the most devastating of miseries, and am no stranger to the harshest of suffering. And so, for me, the easing, the sweetening of the lot of the miserable is a great satisfaction, one of my *raisons d'être*...

Whenever one thinks that the most representative criminologist of the French school, Gabriel Tarde, was unable to avoid this impasse.. 'Cause to suffer without causing to die, or cause to die without causing to suffer', a Sino-Latin or medieval thought, how pathetic it is! All these desk-bound experts know nothing of the great book of life. All their systems are extrapolations from their personal thoughts, their beliefs and above all their class interests...

A code from which one would have struck this lie 'Delinquency is the exception, honesty the rule', which is the keystone of all barbarous repression.. a code which would strike out the notions of punishment and expiation.. a code that would aim at prevention instead of repression, complemented by a penitential science solicitous above all else of amendment, that would bring honour upon a civilised country. To amend means to render good, to make better. Now, in France.. the legislator's sole concern is with punishment. In the setting out of his report, your colleague—I forgot to say your 'honourable' colleague, for which I apologise—Monsieur Maurice Druout acknowledges that the penal settlement is a disgrace.. And do you know what your colleague, your most honourable colleague, understands by disgrace? Rest assured, he does not mean the ravages of the regulations and the climate, nor the theft and the chaos, but quite simply, the pederasty! But, devil take them! Have these colleagues of yours nothing between their legs then? What do you expect convicts to do with their seed? It's only natural. As natural as drinking, eating or breathing. It is a product of the special conditions to which they are subjected rather than of any preference of their own. And, in his cell, doesn't the prisoner masturbate until the point of madness? I know something of what I speak. I have served nine years in solitary, with leg-irons on, and, in all, 13 years in the cells...

Sure, I am quite well aware that in the sphere of penal legislation, and in finance especially, where public opinion is oblivious of such matters, legislation tends to be opportunistic, moving only slowly by small stages and requires little so as to achieve something rather than nothing at all. All the same, this 'aggravated incarceration' which would result would be a shame if ever it came to be legislated. Professors Garçon and Huguency who are its godparents, must not have exhausted too much grey matter in giving birth to this barbarity!

This intellectual activity enabled him to regain his strength somewhat. *Escape* again came to be his central preoccupation. He began again to put by materials. But past failures had made him unduly cautious. An escape from the islands would be the last resort, to be attempted only if everything else foundered, the ideal still being removal from category B classification which would make it possible at last to obtain a concession on the continental mainland. From there, with the aid of the Chinese traders who trafficked in everything, ships and provisions, he would be able to set off in the best possible conditions. Better to bide his time for another year and not scupper his chances. Jean Normand has this to say of the Jacob of this period: 'He is a lively,

adroit fellow of superior intellect, apt to pick up everything quickly, courageous and pugnacious, at once enthusiastic and cool, loyal in dealings with his peers, cunning with the enemy (as he referred to his master). Unfortunately, he has hitherto been much too imaginative and complex in his plans, which would have been splendid had Jacob been dealing with anyone but a population like the prison population, who had shown themselves to be inadequate. Moreover, he discovered this to his cost, for he has very often been let down by them, which now makes him deliberate in his decision-making, which was so snappy in his younger day. He is getting on a bit now, for it will soon be 20 years since his arrival in the Îles du Salut. He has sustained himself throughout this lengthy detention by thinking of his mother whom he loves deeply. Has read enormously and still does.. In short, he is one of the most absorbing men to study and in my view is one of the most outstanding figures of the penal settlement. Has never even been touched by any of the all too numerous vices inherent in the convict condition..

Since his arrival in the settlement, Jacob, just like any man changing his surroundings, has undergone profound changes.. The moment he has a moment's peace he plunges into his books, his numerous skirmishes with the courts and legal matters. Of his mother, who sends him them, he asks all law books touching upon criminal matters and sets about studying...

His southern birthright shines through some exuberant gestures in the most expressive sort of mimicry. By now his ideas are no longer as firm and enthusiast as they once were: today, he has for too long and too persistently been immersed in the cold, deliberate sober thinking of jurists...'

The arrival on Royale island of Doctor Louis Rousseau on 1 September 1920 was to give him fresh courage and patience.

Because Rousseau was a *man*. The first that Alexandre had run across in quite some time. An army physician seconded to Guyane with the rank of commander to preside over the convicts' demise, he tended them and treated them as human beings, which was unheard of.

The convict and the commandant got to know one another in the island's little square. The former was sweeping, the latter lounging upon a bench. The doctor addressed a few words to him. Intrigued by the culture of this amazing prisoner, he came back the following day and then every day after that. An extraordinary friendship struck up. Social barriers crumbled. Rousseau spoke of his own resentment and disillusionment. Alexandre soothed him. He told him of the legal ploys that he employed each week to make life easier for his companions: he explained the letter of the law, the jungle of decrees and regulations; the mentality of the warders and turnkeys, the treachery of banishment and liberation, the idiocy of seeing such a fair country besmirked by the *Tentiaire*, the mechanism which had brought most of them there, the natural savagery of others, the widespread sadomasochistic madness, the sexual obsession, and the dog-eat-dog, blatant thieving that took precedence over all. And he let him in on his criminological undertaking.

'I too,' Rousseau answered dreamily, 'I'd like to write a book, Testimony to everything going on here, about which no one knows anything in France. But I am short of so many things. These laws of which you speak, the anecdotes that you cite...'

'Perhaps I can give you a helping hand,' suggested Alexandre.

The suggestion was enthusiastically accepted. And their collaboration began promptly. It was to last until 1923. Alexandre, while remaining in Abric's employ, was to work an hour or two each day with Rousseau. 'For me, Jacob was the most abundant source of information and likewise the most reliable. Without him, I would not have been able to complete the task of writing *Un*

*médecin au bagne*, which was as much his book as my own,' Rousseau was to write Alain Sergent in 1950. In actual fact, the seconded convict gave himself wholly to the task which is also the most impressive of indictments.

'The penal settlements of Guyane, are essentially charnel-houses where, in alliance with syphilis and tuberculosis, all the parasites of the tropics (malarial haematozoa, *Ankylostoma*, dysenteric amoebae, leprosy bacilli, etc), become the surest auxiliaries of an administration whose role is to watch the melting away of the numbers entrusted to it. Even the most wild-eyed theoreticians of 'elimination' can be satisfied...

Indeed, the condemned man has but one right, the right to hold his tongue. Thwarted in every regard.. clothing, accommodation, bodily hygiene as well as nourishment, he makes no complaint, in order to escape the rigours of a disciplinary board before which the plaintiff is compulsorily summoned and which systematically refuses to place any credence in his words...

For our Dutch, British and Venezuelan neighbours, the sight several times a year of these makeshift rafts loaded with starving escapees (who, braving the dangers of the sea, have gambled everything to escape the slow and inevitable death of the penal settlement) washed up on their shores, is a scandal.

As for rehabilitation methods, such things are unknown here. And what can one say of the treatment doled out under the tropical sun to recidivists, most of them psychopaths?

In truth, the penal settlements of Guyane are the negation of crime prevention, medical and pedagogical re-education methods, of psychiatry, of bio-criminology... in a word, of common sense.<sup>11</sup>

Rousseau's posting to Martinique in 1923 opened up a great void in Alexandre's life. Not that his lot got any worse: by then he was the domestic, or rather, secretary with Monsieur Boulard, the assistant chef de bureau attached to Commandant Crucioni. It was he who smoothed out complicated matters, he who stole files; he, above all, who indicated to other convicts which steps to take. At one time or another, they all had need of his services: they were all indebted to him for some improvements in their lot. By this time he was not only the leader of the islands' convicts but also something of a celebrity, bizarrely respected by the most sinister Corsican guards. However time passed and nothing turned up. In Paris, Marie fumed behind closed doors, sustained by a tiny handful of loyal supporters, including Maître Aron and Madame Bouillot. Despite the novel backing of the local administration who believed him resigned because, being less persecuted, he was showing his teeth less—and also because with age he had acquired a sense of diplomacy—Jacob met with refusal after refusal each time that he applied for reclassification. The backing promised by the governor of Guyane, Monsieur Chanel, proved to be of little impact: in Paris, the ministry stood firm... 'Anarchist gang leader and dangerous individual... His mending of his ways seems most unlikely... Classification recommended.'

In this sort of circumstances, humour was Jacob's best safety-valve: 'No need to lose hope,' he wrote Marie in January 1924. 'Anyway, I hope that, 15 or 20 years hence, a similar overture will be taken into consideration. So you see it is only a matter of time. It is annoying that I cannot receive anything from you, unless you have found a way of sending me a few litres... or maybe a barrelful... of the elixir of life.'

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<sup>11</sup> Doctor Rousseau: Foreword of Mireille Maroger's *Bagne*, 1933.

Everything was ready for one last escape bid. Ropes, sails, provisions, logs of wood, hidden in a shed into which no one ever ventured. He was going to play his last card. No matter what, he would not be coming back. Not alive at any rate.

He was about to push off when something seemed to give. An imperceptible murmur to begin with. At the end of 1923, a petition from the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* and, appended to it, eloquent testimonials from chief adjutant Pascalini, Monsieur Abric, Doctor Rousseau, assistant chief Boulard, made a bit of a stir. And then the arrival of the great journalist Albert Londres, several interviews with him, and his investigation, carried in *Le Petit Parisien* and his open letter to Albert Sarraute, the minister for the colonies, also in the same newspaper on 26 September 1924, a veritable bombshell: 'What is needed in Guyane is not reforms but a general cleaning-out operation...'. This was followed by remarks in the Chamber by deputy Louis Marin, in November, greeted by enthusiasm... 'In the entire world there is not one law professor, criminologist or moralist who, concerning banishment and transportation, will fail to tell you that these penalties are outmoded and that it is truly amazing that, alone among great nations, France still clings to their application!'

Next, one after the other, two journalists arrived on Royale island: Le Fèvre, and above all Louis Roubaud who spent many a long hour with Alexandre and went off with a sensational report. To be sure, these were only signals, but public opinion, suddenly aroused, seemed to be taking an interest in the fate of the authentic damned of the earth.

In Paris, abetted, anticipated and supported by Maître Aron and his wife, Marie stepped up the pressure. In a regular siege of the anterooms. A hail of petitions... 10 January 1925.. 'A despairing mother.. 65 years of age.. Your Clemency'.. 19 January.. 'My unfortunate child.. father a violent alcoholic.. Forced to go to sea from the age of 11, carried away by hot-headed comrades.. Asks but one thing, that he may be a help to his aged mother in her last days.'

The pardon board turned down yet another application. But Edouard Herriot, prime minister, spoke in his favour. Pierre Laval, who had made the penal colony issue his lobby horse, put his shoulder to the wheel also.

Then on 27 February 1925 came the explosion. An enormous piece over 2 columns by Francis Million, the editor in chief of the CGT mouthpiece of *Le Peuple*: 'Once having acknowledged the mistake made, whatever the seriousness of it may be, should we agree to Jacob's being banished once and for all from the land of the living and that his mother must regard him as, to all intents and purposes, dead?... Would it be going overboard to look upon a sentence of 20 years' penal servitude as punishment enough for one of life's beginners who went astray?... Well-earned punishment, some will say. Maybe so. But is he beyond remedy? Can this word 'never' be tossed in the face of this poor mother whose arms reach out for him who, for all his errors, has not ceased to be her most beloved son? Would that not mean that the wretch's life had been spared only so that he might be subjected to a more protracted torment?'

In *Le Quotidien*, Louis Roubaud took up the story. 'What would you think about therapeutics had it been codified and based exclusively upon the temperature of the patients? Every degree of fever would have a single and identical corresponding treatment for all sufferers.. Yet this is how we stand, not, thanks be to God, in therapeutics but in criminology.. You can sift through Jacob's whole life, spelled out on the 161 pages of the indictment at the Amiens trial, you can read the reports of the proceedings even as I have read them in old newspapers, and leaf through the 240 letters which the convict has written his mother over the past 20 years... You will discover neither spitefulness nor cowardice.. Above all he committed a sin of pride by reckoning that he was big

enough to be a rebel, and an offence against logic by pursuing his rebellion on an individual basis. For the past 20 years he has been making up for that double lunacy, and has suffered enough to have come to appreciate that one does not reorganise the social order by burgling châteaux.. More culpable individuals have been less harshly treated because they have shown humility. Pardon for Jacob! He has braved the courts but would not brave a pardon!’ Albert Londres and Doctor Rousseau put in their two pennyworth. An avalanche of letters followed. Petitions were circulated. Former comrades from the heroic days of *L’Agitateur*... since become printer, potter or glass-blower—‘honest folk’ all—stepped in: ‘Let me state that had he been an egoist, he would not have espoused theories which have led to his misfortune’... ‘When he was arrested by Inspector Fabre Jacob was innocent. From that day forth, injustice... just as it did with Liabeuf... turned a good and upright working man into a brigand’... ‘Jacob stole just as he could have been active among the masses: the motive would have been the same.’ Sautarel gave his views in *Le Bonnet Catalan*: ‘How many of those who enjoy liberty and honours are not worth one of his toes? As for myself, I have been able to evaluate him at close quarters: he is the most delicate and the best of men...’ Pleas from Marie and letters from Alexandre were published by the fistful as well as comments by penal settlement survivors who had known him. ‘A miscarriage of justice?’ Roubaud went on. ‘No. But a miscarriage of society perhaps. Jacob is no innocent. He has been convicted of crimes that he has committed. Twenty years ago, in Amiens, in a box too narrow to accommodate the accused and their guards, a young man got to his feet, and spoke up to admit all of the charges. He pleaded on behalf of each of his accomplices and set out an indictment against himself. He was the leader: Jacob!’

March, April: the press campaign spread. Once again the whole of France was familiar with his name. He, far away on his rock in the tropics, and kept abreast of all this to-do by Marie, remained sceptical. How often his hopes had been dashed!

In the end, however, all the fuss did have some effect. The chancellor’s office reopened his case. Monsieur Gilbert, the examining magistrate from the ‘Bonnot Gang’ case and who, having become director of criminal affairs was to handle the Landru affair, examined the dossier and, on 8 July 1925, delivered a favourable pronouncement upon it. Jacob’s sentence was commuted to 5 years’ imprisonment, to be served in France.

On 26 September, handcuffed, he was put aboard the *Biskra*, heading for Saint-Nazaire: ‘The irons were struck from his ankles so that he could be escorted aboard ship,’ wrote journalist Alexis Danan. ‘He could no longer walk. He was hoisted aboard the *Biskra* like a dying man, barefooted, feet swollen and sticky with black blood, his body floating across an azure blue sky.

That was in September. He had the white hair of an old man wanting to see his village again before he died! He arrived in France on 18 October. And was promptly removed to the prison at Rennes. Marie pleaded that he should be returned to Paris: she was too poor to afford endless trips to Brittany. This was agreed: they sent her son to Fresne and then to Melun—where he worked in the printshop. One last setback: he refused to grass on a German prisoner. The penal settlement had not put paid to the righter of wrongs in him.

But these were only rearguard actions. On 19 June 1926, a presidential decree reduced his prison term to 2 years. Again Marie was somewhat excitable: ‘Pardon for July 14... I am 67 years old.’ Maître Aron, by now director of the Maritime Trading Company of France, promised to find him employment with his firm if he was awarded conditional release. That boon was refused. He had to serve every day of his last 2 years in custody: for failing to act as a spy...



When the prison gates opened at last to him on 30 December 1928, he had not seen his mother for precisely 25 years, 2 months and 8 days, a little over a quarter of a century. All that time since he had set foot on a street. And breathed freely. He was 49 years old. Mother and son hugged one another simply as if they had taken leave of each other only the evening before.

Rose had been dead for 5 years.

## The Quiet Family Man

At this point another quarter-century of life lay ahead of Jacob: the end of the fairytale where the hero knows happiness, takes himself a wife and lives happily ever after.

After a short spell in a Paris hospital where they 'made a new man of him', he tried his hand at nursing for a time. Then, as Alexis Danan tells us... 'he was quickly found a position with a charitable friend. But Jacob would be ill at ease with this kindness. Too proud to abuse friendship he aimed to give a tenfold value for the wages received. He studied factory manufacturing procedures, fines, took some examinations, doubled the company's turnover and, one fine day, asked for his cards. The atmosphere of a confined workshop was stifling him. As a free man he needed space.'

To tell the truth, he found Paris oppressive. And Marie did not feel at ease there any more either. They had never been Parisians except by adoption. The traffic jams, the pedestrian crossings, the scurrying, milling crowds had his head spinning. Everything had changed... clothes, cars, shop windows and old friends. When not deceased, survivors from the *Night Workers* episode were leading quiet lives as family men, like Vaillant, who had become a butcher.

As for anarchy, it gave every appearance of having been defeated (a temporary setback, some hoped) since October 1917. In Russia, the Bolsheviks had deported masses of Bakuninists to Siberia, others, they had executed and in the Ukraine they had massacred supporters of Makhno—the very people who had rescued them from the troops of General Wrangel. They had thwarted the Kronstadt revolt. All over the world, the 'authoritarians' enjoyed, in the eyes of the intelligentsia and masses alike a prestige that was unassailable. Even in France the tragic bandits of the 'Bonnot Gang' had created in the popular imagination an unfortunate association between gangsterism and anarchism. Collective action had taken over from individualism. The unions had gotten into the blood of the proletariat and the CGT had shrugged off its last remaining libertarian features to fall under Marxist sway.

Lots of old comrades had also let themselves be taken in as Pierre Monatte had (and even he had come back in 1924) by the fascination of Lenin's success in Moscow. In the eyes of purists, these were renegades. The big and final break took place at a meeting in Grange-aux-Belles in January 1924 when the Bolshevik supporters had opened fire on the libertarians, killing one of them.

A small cohort of those who had not been infected by the belief in the necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat to preface the advent of a classless society had regrouped around the 'anarchist union' set up in 1920. They had a newspaper, *Le Libertaire*, of which Louis Lecoin had become the editorial secretary. Their fight? The fight against militarism. Conscientious objection campaigns for the release of the Spanish comrades Durruti, Ascaso and Jover in 1926 when these had been arrested in Paris just as they had been plotting to assassinate King Alfonso XIII: the indefatigable, impassioned defence of Sacco and Vanzetti, the American anarchists whose execution on 22 August 1927 had just provoked a sensation worldwide, on which occasion the supporters of *L'Humanité* and *Le Libertaire* and Mark Sangnier's *Le Sillon*, of the *Ligue des droits*

*de l'homme* and the Grand Lodge of France had found themselves on the same side for once. A few sensations. Unbelievable commitment. A few supporters around Sébastien Faure and Louis Lecoin.

Jacob was delighted to come upon these people for whom the ideal which he had championed after his fashion was not dead. Whether they were the last of the breed or signs of what was to come, only time would tell. In any case, it was up to them to press on with the fight. The present reverses for the Cause in every realm or nearly all saddened him a little. Men must have lost their minds to believe in the commendability of regimentation, to imagine that freedom could be achieved by means of the suppression of established freedoms. He, returning from a journey into the night and now aged fifty, had to make himself a place in the sun again. In Paris he devoted his energies to the workshop, the meetings and the cramped apartment which he shared with Marie at No 1 Passage Etienne-Delaunay in the 11th *arrondissement*. Make a new life for himself—or rather, carve out for himself a personal life which he had never had—was that possible, given what he had been through?

He wasted no time. With what little savings his mother had amassed—10,000 francs (at the rate of 50 centimes an hour since the war)—he bought a batch of haberdashery goods and with soldiers' boots on his feet and his wares on his back, off he went, his rounds of the markets—'in great, loping strides, his broad, sailor's nostrils sniffing the breeze', as Daman puts it.

Before going into business, though, he felt an urge to accomplish a symbolic act. In Fresnes, he had read in *La Veillée des Chaumières* a description of an old house out towards the Loire, the knocker of the front door of which was in gold. This detail fired his imagination. It was provocation. Dropping everything, he made his way to the town in question, checked the quality of the metal with a touchstone and replaced the item with another of like appearance, which he had had made to measure. This little coup gave him some self-assurance: he was not past it. His eyes and sanguine frown were as keen as ever. He still had it in him to taunt authority on occasions. That was all he had wanted to know. He was never to steal again. The road, fairs, the countryside: the life of a free man opened up to him. He had spent so long in solitary that the sheer delight of roaming the country was one that never palled for him. He knew the value of a siesta beneath some oak tree, a ramble along some deserted street, a chat with fellows whom he happened upon. To begin with he settled in the Yonne department with Marie and then in the Indre in Bois-Saint-Denis, a hamlet near Reuilly. Business was good enough for him to be able to buy himself a huge marquee under which to shelter his wares, a car and a small shed. Henceforth he was 'Marius Jacob... Haberdashery goods, cloth, ready-made goods...company established since 1931—Reuilly (Indre)... business registration number 4361—Issoudun'.

Alexis Danan called on him in 1935:

'His mother had told me:

—You'll find him in Blois on Saturday, in Amboise on Sunday and in Montrichard on Monday and you'll spot his stall easily. Its blue and red and emblazoned 'Marius'.

I did find stall-holder Jacob in Amboise on the Sunday on the mall by the banks of the Loire ... Piercing eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles, strands of white hair escaping from under a tightfitting beret worn at a curious tilt, like a pastrycook's bonnet, a brown kerchief about his neck, he wore a mechanic's blue overalls and had clogs on his feet. He was calling out his patter in a singing voice which reeked of garlic, fresh tide and sunshine.

'Ladies, have a glance at the display as you pass by!'

A ruddy faced peasant woman approached, and haggled over a boy's shirt that she reckoned to be a bit on the short side, to get him to lower his asking price.

'Too short!' Jacob objected. 'Get away... If it was any longer do you think I would be letting it go for 5 francs? And it made of Alsace percale?'

Another woman reckoned it a bit on the long side this time.

'Too long! Put in a hem and there you have it!'

He was so cheery, so engaging, such a boyish sort that in the end the peasant women from Tours unwittingly answered him a rue de Paradis accent... His car was his pride and joy, the second half of his life, the first one being his mother...

'Sixteen bills she cost me,' he told me, 'and there is 20 bills' worth of merchandise here.'

He was proud of his success on account of the marvellous freedom it afforded him to come and go as he pleased, rather than because of any money it brought him in. His needs then were scarcely any greater than they had been when he was 23. He drank water, smoked 2 or 3 pipes a day and, as far as possible, ate only fruit. The Touraine was his favourite stamping-ground, abounding in fairs as it did. He roamed around it to show himself how strong he was, insensible now to the lure of the châteaux and cathedrals. Nothing tempted him now but the open highway, in spite of the gendarmes he occasionally saw along the way.

But the gendarmes travelled by bicycle and any dust kicked up was kicked up by him. He was a happy soul. He let me in on a secret:

'I'm going to set up a home of my own, I think.'

'At the age of 55, Monsieur Jacob?'

'So what? It'll be decided this morning in Montrichard. It's the wife of a mate. He's so carried away by his ideas that he neglects her, the poor thing. Now I'm going to put it to him straight, like this: 'Listen, old man, what must be must be. If you can make her happy, hang on to her. Otherwise, you have to understand, right? I'll take her off with me...'

And carry her off he did. But there was no 'happy ever after'. She dipped into the till. And he was well aware of the fact. To begin with, he had pretended not to have seen anything: since it kept her happy, well ... But he had soon discovered that she despised him for it and took him for a mug ... Furthermore, she came with two daughters, two stuck-up brats who told lies, bickered and were more or less streetwalkers. To be sure, it was their right to do what they wished with their bodies these youngsters, if that was their choice. But there was dishonesty behind it. He was quite willing to work to support all three if need be, and to keep them with a roof over their heads, and keep them in food and clothing and even to be taken for a fool. But they were incapable of distinguishing between genuine rebellion which welled up, demolished and built, and underhand treachery. In short, too selfish to be interesting, while he was too unselfish not to be taken for a clown. The misunderstanding between them grew. Until one fine morning he threw them all out.

Then the only woman in his life, Marie, passed away in her seventy-sixth year. She had waited 25 years for him. Then they had had nearly ten years of happiness together—the odd tiff, long silences ended with the words 'Do you remember ...?' That love had been of too sterling a quality to leave any room for others. Of course, it had had to happen. She had suddenly aged. She had passed the time in petty errands, her little *sautés* of hare, her housework in Reuilly. Her legs began to falter. She tottered behind her broom. She had been buried in the Bois-Saint-Denis cemetery where his grave had also been reserved.

Alexandre, now *Marius Jacob*, doubtless the better to signify a break with his past life, had long since achieved wisdom. The rebelliousness of the past had abated and given way to a Pantagruelian indulgence. The wild, methodical beast he once had been had given way to the Buddhist monk in him. He had cut himself loose from the superficial. Life's illusions had melted away. Daylight had shone through the veils of *maya*. By Christian standards, he was an atheist. Quietly, haughtily so. Religion was all part of the charade. Gladrags for the fearful. However, he was a mystic. At once sage and saint. *Zen*, one might say, if that word was not so devalued in the West. He had chosen to 'bury himself' only two paces from Issoudun, the town which, so Balzac said, had 'left Napoleon numb' because *nothing* went on there. Thus there, the absence of incident was no distraction from contemplation of the leaves, the birds and the intrigues of men there, understanding was free of the distraction of anecdote. Every instant could be lived to the full. The lusciousness of time relished in the face of nothingness. The farm, the dazzling projection of a shining consciousness which had risen above the mechanics of association of ideas to confront its fate.

Making his fortune and taking his revenge ... such notions were foreign to him. Like Socrates, he had discovered a means of living in accordance with his needs and inclinations. Time spent meditating was time beyond price. He had *fulfilled* himself. Pierre-Valentin Berthier—then a reporter in Issoudun—says that he carried inside him, simultaneously, the character of a Jean Valjean and that of Monseigneur Myriel. One might also think of François Xavier and John of the Cross. He would have laughed, though, at the very suggestion.

So was Jacob burnt out, finished, resigned then? Far from it: so far that in July 1936 he went missing for some months. 'He's gone off to see some friends': that is all anyone knew.

In fact, he had been following developments in Spain very closely. The generals' attempted coup. The release of imprisoned FAI militants, the armed uprising by the masses. Enjoying a majority in the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), all powerful in Barcelona, organised to perfection around the FAI, the anarchists dominated the *Frente Popular*. The hope of a genuinely libertarian revolution then stirred again within him along with past memories of the previous century when he had carried messages and money to persecuted Iberian comrades.

Suddenly stirred, the erstwhile ship's captain heeded the call and jumped into his Peugeot. The fighter in him had been aroused. Too old now to handle a rifle and clamber all over a fortification, he might still be of service.

Off he went to see Sir Basil Zaharoff, the petroleum-arms-dealer. By the end of their lengthy discussion, the pair had come to an arrangement: so many kilos of gold against so many machine-guns, to be delivered in France, Switzerland or England.

Next he examined the routes by which these arms might reach Spain: a flotilla of requisitioned boats in a regular and unbroken convoy struck him as the best solution.

The gold? Finding that could not have been easier. Spanish churches were brimming with it. This he knew something about. So did the FAI militants who made it their war chest. But these well-meaning young folk were only amateurs. On every other occasion, they bungled the job, for want of the necessary technical expertise. Moreover, none of it was organised. Fortunes were going to waste. The fences of whose services the revolutionaries availed, cheated them shamefully: in return for gold they delivered trucks with a bed of stones, with only a top layer of guns—and most often these were unusable.

His arrangements made down to the tiniest detail, Alexandre finally journeyed to Barcelona. There a tremendous disappointment lay in store for him. Ascaso was dead and so was Durruti.

The communists, past masters in the art of penetration and infiltration, held the reins in the capital. Federica Montseny, the minister of Health and the Italian Berneri, in *Guerra di Classe* were almost alone in signalling the danger. Too preoccupied with fighting on every front, the comrades seemed not to understand them. Jacob was redirected from one authority to another. Bounced around for office to office. Unable to contact anyone in charge. The communists kept him kicking his heels. The social democrats proved evasive. Where were the anarchists? In the mass graves. Betrayed in their rear they sacrificed their all at the front.

And then the old gent realised that he had fallen for *maya's* latest trap. The Spanish revolution was not going to take place. The authoritarians were ready to coexist with the capitalists, before they would permit the establishment of authentic-self-management. The 'International Brigades' had been merely the stirring of the world's conscience in the face of the hold of totalitarians on every side. And Stalin was playing Franco's game.

'Only to be expected,' thought Jacob. 'I'm a utopian. History has no place for sentiment, only for the balance of power. Until such time as the individual consciousness of all men has developed further, the will to power of the few will emerge triumphant.'

And so he climbed back into his car and returned to his market-stall in Issoudun, a debonair, smiling, enigma.

It was around this time that he became acquainted with Paulette, a good 15 years his junior. She had a heart of gold, rather fussy and overbearing, but only with her dog. They hit it off. Got married. Happiness, all was happiness. Having given up on it all, everything was a wonder, a surprise, a marvel to him.

News of the declaration of war reached them in the Indre department. In September 1939, Louis Lecoin, virtually alone had attempted to make one last gesture against the shedding of blood: a tract of which 100,000 copies were printed, headed *Immediate Peace*. 'The price of peace will never be as ruinous as the price of war. For one builds nothing with death: whereas everything may be hoped for with life'.

Jacob was 60 years old. If he failed to join the resistance, his age was not the reason. The reason was that the movement was controlled by Gaullists and communists: he had no time for either. He had no desire to fight so that in the event of success a new State might be reborn—be it capitalist or authoritarian—bearing within it the same virus, the same germs. And the Nazi deportation camps? Well of course they were atrocious. He knew that. An imperceptible smile fluttered across his lips: the camps he had sampled himself had been French ones. Folk who, from one side or the other, were talking today about the 'liberation of French soil' had jailed other folk like Lecoin who did not want to see a human being ground down in any way. They had decimated them since 1871. And since 1848. Ever since the bourgeoisie had taken power—so as not to remake the history of the world.

On the other hand, the idea of collaboration with the enemy was alien to him. Today a handful of maquisards on the run could testify that they managed to survive only thanks to an old anarchist ex-con whose door in Reuilly in the Indre department was ever open. Hospitality was a law he lived by. No questions asked. He harboured, hid, said nothing. But joining an army, even a guerrilla army ... that was quite another matter, even if one did despise Nazism.

As for blackmarketeering, his involvement was so slight that he was probably one of the only traders in France brought to ruin by the war, through having refused to raise his prices—so much so that, after devaluation, he was selling goods cheaper than cost price.

Moreover it was during this period that he again came into conflict with the law: his only brush with the law before he died. And what a reason!

Some tax inspectors turned up to make an on the spot check as to whether he had proper invoices for the stocks of cloth in his possession. These officials, charged with preventing all fraud, in fact were solely concerned with claiming a piece of the action in any possible dealings. The indecent luxuriousness of their clothing at a time when the average citizen could not get hold of a pair of socks without coupons was rather eloquent testimony to this. Jacob, of course, had only a moderately soft spot for such individuals.

However, while his stocks had melted away since the start of the Occupation, they had not dwindled enough for the invoice corresponding to 35-metre bolts of banded fibre cloth not to be missing.

'My supplier lived in Toulouse,' he explained. 'I have written to him 5 times asking for it. Not once has he replied. In the end I learned that he has been deported. So write to him in Germany if you manage to pick up his trail. Maybe you'll have more luck than me.'

The inspector felt this to be a flouting of his authority, an aspersion upon his job, an affront to his honour:

'Very well,' he said. 'You have breached the regulations. You can explain all this in the criminal court.'

And indeed he did have Jacob charged with unlawful possession of goods. Come the day of the trial, Alexandre-Marius refused to show up:

'With my record,' he told Berthier, 'it's not even worth the trouble to try to defend myself. I'll be found guilty. But you go. You can tell me how my counsel copes.'

So Berthier trotted along to the court-house in Issoudun. From the press benches, he listened to the charge-sheet read out by the prosecution, damning his friend and denouncing him as one of the most redoubtable blackmarketeers France had known and blaming him for all of the country's ills—but making no reference to his past.

Jacob's counsel, Fernand Boudraud, rose to speak. He had never had anything more than an excerpt from his client's court records in his hands: these had been drawn up after Jacob's rehabilitation and were therefore unblemished. He had no idea who Jacob had been. Warming to his task, he pleaded on behalf of 'this white-haired man, this model citizen with an irreproachable past'. He sought the presiding judge's indulgence. The latter's face broke into a broad grin, for he was familiar with Jacob's antecedents. Sentence was pronounced: one month's imprisonment.

And so, one fine morning, Alexandre-Marius showed up at the prison in Châteauroux, whither he had been summoned. There he spent thirty long days '... more unbearable than my whole time in the penal settlement', he was to say. Incarceration had come to be unbearable for him. He caught lice in his cell and a sort of typhus, which says a lot for the hygiene standards of French prisons. All because the courts found themselves incapable of conceiving that, in a half a century, someone might have changed. Because it is normal practice to sentence an ex-con to a month inside in circumstances in which an 'honest man' would have been fined and given a suspended sentence. The old anarchist had long been haunted by these world-weary thoughts.

Then yet again, forgiveness triumphed over rancour. A fine indulgent smile broke on his lips as he told the tale to his friend, as if it had been a 'real corker'.

Paulette had passed away shortly after the Liberation, of cancer, after a protracted agony. She had been laid to rest alongside Marie. He was poleaxed by grief. Loneliness did not affect him. Life was for living. Death for dying. Only those for whom life is a lingering death—a shimmering

intoxication, imminent oblivion, an otherworldly frenzy—when the heart has long since been anaesthetised, can take that to be a fatuous observation.

Jacob's activity was unceasing. Markets. His dog Negro, his cats, all that gallops, crows, gathers nectar or flies. Talks. Meetings with friends, those who took over from Lecoin at the *Défense de l'homme* and especially Berthier, the fellow-traveller he had come across at Issoudun market. Jacob wrote articles for them, usually signing them with an alias.

He was endlessly lobbying on behalf of former comrades in captivity who awaited salvation from his hands: those who turned up seeking asylum at his house in Reuilly, those who exploited him and cheated him and rifled his till as the need arose. ('Ah well! They get such pleasure out of it!... I don't need anything, myself!') Correspondence worthy of a minister, with young people, writers, reporters, activists, deputies, ministers; with Alain Bombard, after he had sent him a copy of his book *Naufragé Volontaire*, with the Rev. Fr. Riquet because he had given a talk on the theocratic State which had existed in Paraguay between 1640 and 1757, saying not a word about two capital facts, namely the prohibition of the death penalty and the right of the offender to choose his punishment; with criminologists, every time some new criminals statute was in the air—and he was forced to remark that whereas there had been formal improvements, the mentality of expiation was unchanged.

His friends were few but loyal to the end. ('Not comrades, only friends'). There was Louis Briselance, the stall holder; the Denizeau's from Amboise, who had tried to make him at home in their house so that he might feel less alone, but does one put a wild beast, even a sleeping one, in a cage? Bernard Bouquereau, from Issoudun; Rodriguez, the moving spirit behind the individualist centre for social studies; Berthier, whose mother bought a raincoat from him in 1934, she had left her purse behind and he had all but forced the garment on her though he had never laid eyes on her before and though the two men had not yet met; Alain Sergent (in 1950) who wrote a book about him, *Alexandre Jacob: anarchiste de la Belle Epoque* ('It was almost a disappointment when I set eyes on him for the first time', said Sergent. 'Then we talked and the protean side of the personality appeared. An extraordinary mobility of expression. The air of an old wily lawyer: Then, without transition, when he conjured up memories of the penal colonies, an expression of terrifying violence. Behind it all, the serenity of a Hindu..')

20 April 1951

*My dear Berthier,*

*I am virtually unable to walk any more. My left leg is dead. Rheumatism. Have some books taken to the 'Catholic'<sup>1</sup> bookshop for me...*

*June 1951... I have difficulty using my left arm.. Sciatica.. Monsieur Appert is looking after me.. My neighbours run my errands.. Berthe and Briselance came to see me in Toto's 302.. My strength is low..*

*5 December 1952. I'm raising a superb hunting dog. He has the features of Clemenceau. He's not for selling but for gift. Should you know an animal lover among your relatives..*

*23 December 1952: For the past three weeks I have been ailing and often bedridden.. Appert's diagnosis: St Anthony's fire. That's wrong. My system is poisoned by a molar from my upper jaw.. The storm on the 13th has made a considerable hole in the roof..*

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<sup>1</sup> The bookshop in question had nothing specifically Catholic about it. Jacob had dubbed it so because, being located beside a religious boarding-school, some pious objects were on sale there.



*6th May 1953. Some Canadiens came to fetch the dog.. I've just read Wogt's book on neo-Malthusianism.. As far as famine in the world goes I have an idea that a lot of water will flow under the bridge before men will share wealth fairly. They're more inclined to share artillery shells.. Negro is going on 18 years old and the infirmities of age torment him. The cats too. So that day and daily I am immersed in veterinary nursing..*

*In the elections, the least of the well-to-do, the creeping Jesuses have won over the list of 'Reds' made up of workers and artisans..*

*Some knights of leisure<sup>2</sup> have burgled the gendarmerie post, two doctors, the chemist and a haberdasher. Little to show for it. The notary, it seems is retrospectively ill and has not been visited..*

After 1952, Jacob gave up replacing his stock. With little or no expenses, he had enough to live on quietly for some years. But he was beset by various ailments. Irritating crises which attacked his physique but not his morale. The signs of inescapable aging. Soon, unless he took care, it would be the onset of decay.

In 1952 he drew up his will. Not that he had huge sums to bequeath: the equivalent of maybe 5,000 or 10,000 francs at the 1969 value, if one counted the ground and the stall. But he was haunted by an obsession: a fear that, having no heir, the State, his old adversary, might profit by what he left behind. With this in mind, he bequeathed his house to Briselance during his lifetime allegedly in return for an allowance for life, and his meagre real-estate holdings, down to the last fork, were passed on to Berthier by means of phoney bills of sale and various unlikely ploys.

A derisory, symbolic engagement: it gave him the satisfaction of putting one over for the last time on the authority against which he had never ceased to battle in one form or another. And, god knows, the guerilla war between them had never ceased, ever since he had recovered his freedom and in spite of the lessons he had learnt: in 1935, he had been summoned before the inspector for having called the gamekeeper a 'gargoyle-head' (*tête de cul de lampe*) ('..oh, but a gargoyle is a work of art and so,.' for which remark the gamekeeper, quite moved, thanked him); then there was the request for a voter's card for Negro, a little later ('I've received a tax notification for my dog, Negro. I'm going to do duty as a tax payer, but I'm asking for a voting card for Negro. He has never once told lies, never got drunk and I reckon there are scarcely any voters in the department of whom you could say as much'); the run-ins with tax agents during the war on account of his refusal to up his prices to taxation level; and the raid by the FFI (French Forces of the Interior) at the time of the Liberation, when they had imagined that they would find stocks of considerable value at his place. There would never be an end to it.

In 1953, he asked Berthier—who, 2 years before, had become a bookseller in Paris—to send him a book on toxic substances, a volume by Baumetz and Dujardin. Berthier posted it from Paris. Then he had ordered others: Berthier, somewhat dubious, did not forward these. No matter. He procured them elsewhere. And morphine too.

'My fingers are starting to be twisted out of shape by rheumatism.' He told his friends glibly. 'You see friends, I want to take my leave with a clear mind. If I wait, I may no longer have the courage to do it. I don't want to run the risk of senility. The prospect is too ugly.'

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<sup>2</sup> This was the title (*chevaliers de la desouvrance*) given by Balzac in his *La Rabouilleuse* to the gilded and rowdy youth of Issoudun who, in the early days of the Restoration, carried out pranks in poor taste there.

All his affairs were in order. His heart and mind were undiminished. Only his body bore the telltale signs presaging decrepitude. Was everything in order? Not quite!

July 1954.

*Monsieur le Procureur,*

*On 18 January 1954, I forwarded to your subordinate, the chief clerk of the civil court, a request for a copy of my court file, enclosing a money order for 180 francs, plus a 15 franc stamp to cover postage costs. And on 22nd January I received the items requested. Now, the document in question is stamped with the printed price of 140 francs.. Consequently I reckon that in all justice your subordinate ought to have returned the excess payment to me, an amount which has now grown to the figure of 70 francs.*

*While still quite young, I was inoculated with the virus of justice and that has brought me much annoyance. Even today, in the autumn of my life the slightest injustice pains me and arouses in me the Don Quixote of the springtime of my youth. Whereas your reactions, Monsieur le Procureur, who are, I dare say, an established figure, must be very different. You must regard as ridiculous a claim for such a trifling sum: you must think and believe me to be a pain in the neck preoccupied solely with picking quarrels with servants of the State. You are wrong. I do try to understand. I ferret for, and dig up the reasons which could have induced a hireling of the Prince, albeit bedecked with honours exceeding those awarded to underlings, so to purloin my fifty five francs..*

*In your service, Monsieur le Procureur, there are bullies and thugs who adhere to the letter rather than the spirit and whose faces have never been creased by a smile. The judges of the Holy Inquisition, black or red, were and still are made of such stuff. There are others, more cultured and of less unbending temperament, who are more inclined to take a human view and be more understanding, and thus to display diligence rather than ruthlessness..*

*As it would please me to place you in this latter category, I beseech you, Monsieur le Procureur, kindly to accede to my request by having returned to me the sum which is my due, and I ask you to accept my compliments.*

*Marius-Alexandre Jacob.*

*Retired housebreaker.*

Needless to say, this letter went unanswered. On the other hand, it was published, thanks to Berthier, in *L'Unique*, Emile Armand's individualist journal. Maybe the prosecutor taken to task in it had occasion to read it through.

That left one remaining wish to be fulfilled. The enactment of a ceremony bidding farewell to life. An invocation. A mass to be celebrated. Drawing the vibrations of the harmony of the universe to himself: loving, and making love one last time. Self-purification preparatory to departure.

For a long time now he had had a notion of a certain young woman, a married lady some 30 years his junior. He was tormented by regret at not having gratified his desire. As long as life was there to be got on with, this thing was bearable: the surge of desire was balanced by a concern not to upset the couple's happiness.

But now, how could he face the great settling of accounts without having explored every opportunity in his path? How could he make so bold as to claim that everything was in order before the bench of his conscience, when he had not pushed himself to the limit? And what did the respect of men amount to, when seen alongside Oblivion?

A somewhat stiff-legged Alexandre Marius set off in search of the young woman. Mischievously, he put temptation in her way. He lured her on, latched on to her, he had her. But he wanted no underhand behaviour either. So off he went to have a word with her husband.

‘For a long time, you’ve been looking for a way of rendering me a service,’ he told him. ‘Today you are in a position to help my last wish be fulfilled. If you are honest, you will even have to concede that what I ask of you deprives you of nothing, costs you nothing and puts you to no trouble. Are you still willing?’

‘Yes,’ came the friend’s reply.

And again ‘yes’, albeit unquestionably a less ready ‘yes’, when he discovered the nature of the favour being asked: but the criteria of ordinary morality and ordinary honour no longer applied as far as Jacob was concerned. His friend had been disarmed. Obligated to be candid, he had to admit that he was not so in love as to refuse to bring pleasure to the two people he most preferred in the whole world.

So the night of bliss could proceed. It took place between Monday 16th August and Tuesday 17 August. An engagement with death. Farewell to the body’s mechanisms. Promises from the soul. His swan song.

The next day, Jacob penned a few pages meant for his friends ... ‘So here you have them, dear friends, all the trifles which I have to pass on to you. It remains for me to thank you very sincerely for all the marks of friendship which you have bestowed upon me. You are still young. You appear to be set on a course not too fraught with difficulties: keep straight on and good luck! As for myself, I am weary, very weary. I made myself a promise to put an end to it all in 1953 (..) I have lived a life brimful of happiness and misfortunes, and I’ve been offered the pleasure of closing it with such a swan song that I consider myself blessed by fate. Also, I take my leave of you without despair, with a smile on my lips and peace in my heart. You are too young to be able to appreciate the pleasure which lies in leaving in good health, in snapping one’s fingers at all of the infirmities which old age holds in store. There they are all assembled, the swine, ready to devour me. Very little for me. Address yourselves to those who cling to life. I have lived. I can face death.’

On Friday 27th August, a few more jottings: ‘Today I laid on a little banquet for the village lads. There were 9 of them, from 20 months up to twelve years of age. They stuffed their bellies. (..) Had I the time, I would do a little washing tomorrow morning so as to leave nothing dirty. If the linen is not dry, you’ll find it hanging on the line to dry.’

Then he had taken his beloved car out one last time to go and pop a large batch of letters into the box. ‘When you get this letter, I will be no more. I am taking my own life on a Saturday so that folk will have the Sunday to see to the body and so that the laying-out and the arrangements do not inconvenience them.’

He spent a quiet night. At daybreak on Saturday 28th August, he made up a bed of a blanket and some sheets. He laid out Negro, his old, blind and infirm dog upon it. He took his paw. He drove home the needle and made Negro a present of half the morphine. Then, he checked the flame of the wood stove which had been lighted so as to give off carbon dioxide fumes and thus to finish off, if need be, the work of the injection. Just as he in his turn was about to stretch himself

out, he had one last thought. He picked up a scrap of paper and scribbled on it: 'Linen washed, rinsed, dried, but not ironed. I'm in a lazy frame of mind. Sorry. You will find two litres of rosé wine beside the pantry. To your health.'

Then he in turn stretched out upon the bed alongside Negro and picked up the syringe.

When his friends came into the house a few hours later it was almost as if he was sleeping peacefully.

Negro was not dead. It was necessary to finish him off.

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Alexander Marius Jacob

Alias Escande, alias Attila, alias Georges, alias Bonnet, alias Feran, alias Hard to Kill, alias The  
Burglar  
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