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The Baby

Octave Mirbeau

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Motteau gave his testimony as follows:

“There you have it, your honor. You’ve listened to all these people —my good neighbors and my good friends. They haven’t cut me any slack, and that’s fair enough. They felt uncomfortable as long as I was in Boulaie-Blanche, and as long as there were no cops between them and the barrels of my shotgun. They may not like me, of course, but they’re careful not to let their hatred show, because they know that Motteau is not someone to be played with. Today, it’s a different story. See? I shrug my shoulders and I laugh in spite of myself.

“Maheu —one-eyed Maheu —who’s come to tell you that I’m a murderer and a thief —OK, fine! It was Maheu that, last year at the Gravoir Auction, killed Blandé’s guard. I was with you, you hoodlum, I don’t deny it. And Léger, the hunchback who was churning out hypocrisies a minute ago —Léger robbed the church of Pontilou six months ago. Oh, he won’t have the balls to deny it. We pulled that one off together, —ain’t that right, Léger?

“You don’t know, do you, your honor, who it was that wrung the neck of Monsieur Jacquinot, that night when he was coming home from the Feuillet Fair? You’ve thrown a lot of innocent peo-

ple in jail for that one, after your endless investigations. It's Sorel —Sorel who demanded my head a moment ago, OK? What? Ain't you gonna protest, comrade? There's no way he can, don't you see? While he strangled the old guy, I went through his pockets —ha! This surprises you? But look at them! We're not proud anymore, are we, boys? We're not arrogant. We're turning pale, we're shaking, and we're saying to ourselves that when we turn in Motteau for the same thing we want to clear ourselves of, we're just turning *ourselves* in, and the same guillotine is going to cut through all of our necks.

“Your honor, what I'm telling you is the truth, and you can believe me. We're all like this in Boulaie-Blanche. Blessed Mother! You better believe it! For two leagues, all around the hamlet, there's nothing but heather and gorse bushes on the one side, and nothing but sand and rocks on the other. Here and there are some thin little birch trees, and then of course plenty of those stunted pines that can't really grow. The cabbages, even —they won't come up in our gardens at all! The place is cursed. How do you expect us to live in it? Oh, there's the Bureau of Charity, isn't there? Come on —it's just a cute little joke. It gives nothing, or, it gives you nothing unless you're rich. And so, since we're not far from the woods, we begin by doing some poaching. Sometimes this brings in something, but then there's the dead season, and besides that there's the guards who'll track you down, and trials, and jail. My God —jail! Here we go again! We're fed, then we build traps while we're waiting to get out. I ask you, judge, what would you do in our place? Would you work somewhere else? Go and get a job on a farm? The problem is, when we say we're from Boulaie-Blanche, it's as though we'd just come in from hell. They run us out of there with their pitch forks. So we've got to steal! And when someone makes up his mind to steal, he must decide to kill. The one thing doesn't go without the other. If I tell you everything here today, it's because you've got to know what's what in Boulaie-Blanche, and that the fault really lies with the authorities, who never bother

to do anything for us, and who isolate us from life like mad dogs, or as if we had the plague.

“Now I’ll get to the present business.

“I got married just about a year ago, and my wife got pregnant in the first month. I gave it some thought: a baby to feed, when we can’t even feed ourselves —it’s stupid. ‘We have to make it disappear!’ I told my wife. Fortunately, close to our place there’s an old woman who wanders around, and she’s good at working out schemes like this. In return for a hare and two rabbits that I gave her, she brought my wife some plants and then some powders that she put together to make —I don’t know what concoction to drink. This didn’t do a thing —nothing. The old hobo lady told us, ‘Don’t worry yourselves: it’s as good as dead. I tell you it’ll come out dead.’ Since she had a reputation around the neighborhood for being a sorceress who knows her stuff, I didn’t concern myself any further. I said to myself, ‘That’s good, then. It’ll come out dead.’ But she lied, the old thief, as you’ll see in a minute.

“One night, under a beautiful moon, I killed me a roe deer. I was coming back with the deer on my back, and I was all happy, because you just about never get a deer, on any night. It was around three in the morning when I got back to my place. There was a light in the window. This surprised me, so I beat on the door, which is always barricaded from inside when I’m not around. It didn’t open. I knocked some more, a little harder. Then I hear this little crying, and some cursing, and then a sort of dragging step that was dragging across the tiles. And what do I see? My wife is half naked, pale as a corpse, and all splashed with blood. First I thought that somebody’d tried to kill her, but she said to me, ‘Not so much noise, idiot! Can’t you see I’m havin’ the baby?’ Holy shit! It had to come one of these days, but then when it did come, I was caught completely off guard. I came in, threw the deer in a corner, and hung my shotgun on a nail.

“‘Did it come out dead at least?’ I asked my wife.

“Oh, yeah, dead —just take a look!’ she says to me, and I see on the bed, in a bunch of bloody rags, some naked thing wiggling around.

“I looked at my wife, she looked at me, and for five minutes or so, we were quiet.

“Were you cryin’?’ I asked her.

“No!’

“Did you hear somebody prowlin’ around outside?’ “No!’

“Why’d you have the light on?’

“It wasn’t two minutes the candle was lit, before you knocked,’ she told me.

“All right’, I said. Then I grabbed the baby by the feet, and real quick, like we do with rabbits, I gave it a good belt in the head. After that I stuck it in my game bag and I got my shotgun down again. You can believe me if you want, yer honor, but I swear, through the whole thing I never even knew if it was a girl or a boy.

“I went to the Grand Pierre spring. All around, as far as you can see, there was nothing but some scattered heather, growing in between the piles of rocks. Not a tree or a house stood nearby, not even a path that led to the place! As for living creatures, you’ll only see some sheep grazing up there, and some shepherds, when there’s no more grass down in the fields. Right by the spring there’s a deep clay quarry that’s been abandoned for a few hundred years. Some undergrowth hides the open mouth of the pit from your eye. That’s where I go to hide my gun, and to hide myself when the cops are payin’ me a visit. Who would dare to venture into that deserted place, which people seriously believe is haunted by ghosts? Nothing to fear. I threw the baby in the quarry, and I heard the sound of it hitting the bottom: ‘Plunk!’ Daylight was breaking, very pale, behind the hill.

“Coming back, in the path from Boulaie-Blanche, I spotted a gray form behind the hedge, something like the back of a man or a wolf, —you can’t always make things out so well, in the half-light, even

if you do it all the time —and it was sliding softly, crouching down low, creeping along, and it stopped.

“Hey!’ I yelled in a loud voice. ‘If you’re a man, show yourself or I’ll shoot!’

“Look, Motteau, it’s me!’ said the form, standing up all of a sudden. “Yeah, it’s me,’ I said, ‘and don’t forget, Maheu, there’s a load of buckshot in my gun for nosy people.’

“And he says, ‘Oh, no problem! I’m resetting my traps. But you know... it’s not only the deer that squeal when you kill them.’

“No!’ I told him, ‘There’s also chicken-shits like you, you ugly one-eyed fuck!’ I aimed at him, but I didn’t shoot —I don’t know why. I was wrong. Next day, Maheu went to get the cops.

“Now listen to me carefully, your honor. There are thirty households in Boulaie-Blanche: that’s to say thirty women and thirty men. Have you counted how many living kids there are in those thirty households? There are only three. And the others —the suffocated ones, the strangled ones, the buried ones: in other words, the dead ones —have you counted *them*? Go and dig up the ground, down there in the skinny shadows of the birches, or at the feet of those scrawny pines. Drop a pole down into the wells. Turn over the gravel and sweep the sand away from the quarries. Under the birches and the pines, at the bottoms of the wells, mixed in with the sand and the pebbles, you’ll see more bones of newborns than there are bones of men and women in the graveyards of the big cities. Go into the houses and ask the men, both young and old, what they’ve done with all the babies their wives have carried! Put the question to Maheu, Léger, Sorel —*everyone*!

“All right! Maheu, you see that it’s *not* just the deer that squeal when you kill them.”

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