THE INSURRECTIONIST
(L' INSURGE)

by
Jules Vallès

Translated by Sandy Petrey

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INTRODUCTION

Some Historical Names and Events

These facts should help those readers unfamiliar with French
history identify the historical personages with whom
the hero lived.

DATES

1789, 1793—1793 was the year of the Reign of Terror during
the French Revolution. Several thousand aristocrats and sus-
pected counter-revolutionaries were executed. It is contrasted
with the more “moderate” 1789, when the Bastille was over-
thrown and the Revolution began with comparatively little
bloodshed.

February—February, 1848, the month when three days of
street fighting in Paris overthrew the July monarchy of
Louis-Philippe and established the Second Republic. The
revolution began when demonstrators in the Boulevard des
Capucines were killed by regular troops and their bodies
paraded through Paris by the rebels.

May 15—May 15, 1848, when the Chamber of Deputies was
invaded by Parisians demanding a more radical orientation
by the new Second Republic.

June—June, 1848, the month in which a socialist uprising
against the Second Republic was mercilessly put down. Sev-
eral thousand leftists were killed, several more thousands
imprisoned.

1848—See February and June.
December 2—December 2, 1851, the date of Napoleon III’s coup d’état heralding the death of the Second Republic and the birth of the Second Empire.

October 31—October 31, 1870, the day when Parisians, outraged at news of Bazaine’s capitulation, attempted to overthrow the Government of National Defense.

January 22—January 22, 1871, when an attempt to overthrow the government by insurgents led by Sapia resulted in troops firing on the people and killing Sapia.

**OTHER REFERENCES**

Affre, Denis—Archbishop of Paris, killed during the fighting of June, 1848.

Badinguet—Nickname of Napoleon III. Its origin is obscure, but it was generally assumed that Napoleon had used this name when he escaped from prison in Ham before coming to power.

Baudin—A deputy killed during the fighting accompanying Napoleon’s coup d’état. His tomb was the site of an anti-government demonstration in 1869.

Bazaine, Achille—Commander of French forces in Franco-Prussian War. After exercising his command in a staggeringly incompetent fashion, he surrendered with his entire army on October 27, 1870.

Bibi—See Picard.

Blanc, Louis—Historian of the French Revolution and Utopian Socialist. He proposed the eradication of poverty through a system of social workshops organized by the government. Exiled after the uprising of June, 1848, he returned to Paris in 1870, was elected to the National Assembly and disavowed the Commune.

Blanqui, Auguste—A leader of French socialism from 1830 until his death in 1881. An exponent of conspiratorial revolutionary measures, Blanqui was imprisoned several times before the Commune. After the fall of the Second Empire, he founded a socialist newspaper, *La Patrie en Danger*, and attempted to organize an uprising against the government. His theories held that one spark could be enough to set off a revolutionary explosion. Arrested by Thiers just before the proclamation of the Commune, Blanqui was held hostage by the regular government and was sorely missed by the communards. He was not released from prison until 1879.

Bonjean—Parisian magistrate held as a hostage by the Commune and executed during Bloody Week.

Bridoison—Archetype of imbecile judge, from a character in Beaumarchais’ *Marriage of Figaro*.

Brunel, Paul Antoine—Lieutenant in the French army during the Siege of Paris, he was among the first of the communards to seize the initiative and establish military positions on March 18. Known as “Brunel the Burner” for his practice of destroying any house interfering with his martial strategy, he was instrumental in beginning the burning of Paris during Bloody Week. He escaped to England after the fall of the Commune.

Cavaignac, Louis Eugène—French general given dictatorial powers during the revolt of June, 1848. Parisian socialists considered him responsible for the savage brutality with which the revolt was put down.

Central Committee—Central Committee of the National Guard, which became the unofficial governing body of Paris during the Siege and was the first governing body after the proclamation of the Commune.

Chanzy—General captured on March 18, 1871, and held prisoner by the Commune.
Châtiments—A collection of poems by Victor Hugo violently attacking Napoleon III.

Chaudey, Gustave—Commander of government troops during the battle of January 22, 1871. Allegedly responsible for Sapia’s death in that battle, Chaudey was arrested by the Commune and subsequently executed by Rigault.

Cluseret, Gustave—A former officer in the French army, Cluseret was elected a member of the Commune and placed in command of its army. He was dismissed for incompetence but acquitted of the charge of treason originally brought against him. He was exiled following Bloody Week.

Committee of Public Safety—Committee established to maintain order during the Commune. Its name was a deliberate reference to the Committee of Public Safety associated with the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror.

Compiègne—Favorite residence of Napoleon III.

Considérant, Victor—Disciple of Fourier, journalist and author. Exiled for his part in the rebellion of June, 1849, Considérant subsequently went to Texas where he attempted to establish a Fourierist phalanstery. Due in part to the War Between the States, his attempt failed and he returned to France to live in obscurity.

Courbet, Gustave—Leader of the realist school of French painting, friend of Proudhon, whose social ideas he shared, Courbet was elected a member of the Commune and imprisoned after Bloody Week.

Cri du Peuple—Newspaper edited by Vallès. First published on February 22, 1871, suppressed by General Vinoy, published again during the Commune, suppressed after Bloody Week, published again in 1883 to continue under Vallès' editorship until his death two years later. The Cri du Peuple was the main organ of the "moderate" communards during the Commune.

Darboy—Archbishop of Paris held hostage and executed by the Commune.

Delescluze, Charles—After an important role in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, Delescluze was exiled by the Second Empire. Allowed to return in 1860, he founded an opposition newspaper and fought vigorously against Napoleon III. Elected both a member of the Commune and a deputy in the regular government, Delescluze resigned the latter post to devote himself entirely to the Revolution. He died a particularly heroic death during Bloody Week.

Dombrowski, Jaroslaw—A Polish revolutionary who escaped to Paris from Siberia, Dombrowski was a member of the Central Committee of the Commune and one of the principal commanders of the Commune's army. Accused of betraying his men to the enemy and relieved of his command, Dombrowski died fighting on the barricades as a simple soldier during Bloody Week.

Doullens—A city in Picardy to which many revolutionaries were sent after the revolt of June, 1848.

Du Camp, Maxime—Journalist, author, intimate friend of Flaubert. Du Camp wrote a violently anticommunal history of the Commune after its fall.

Eudes, Emile—Disciple of Blanqui, one of the leaders of the Commune's army.

Favre, Jules—Republican opponent of the Second Empire. With Ferry, one of the principal architects of the Government of National Defense, Favre was a convinced opponent of socialist attempts to seize power, and after the fall of the Commune he was opposed to any mercy for the defeated.

Ferré, Théophile—One of Rigault’s lieutenants, Ferré was noted for his impassive brutality. He was condemned and executed following Bloody Week.
Ferry, Jules—A republican opponent of the Empire elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1869. One of the primary architects of the Government of National Defense and in charge of feeding Paris during the Prussian siege, Ferry won the nickname Ferry-Famine. During the Third Republic Ferry had a highly successful political career despite attacks from both the right and extreme left.

Figaro—Moderate newspaper founded by Villemessant during the Second Empire.

Floureens, Gustave—Republican opponent of the Empire and member of the Commune, Floureens was killed during an expedition against the besieging army of M. Thiers.

Foutriquet—Nickname of Thiers, synonymous with “person of no importance.”

Gambetta, Léon—Leader of the republican minority in the Chamber of Deputies at the end of the Second Empire. Celebrated for his oratorical powers, Gambetta was instrumental in forming the Government of National Defense. Although a convinced republican and a proponent of unyielding resistance to the Prussians, he was both too theatrical and too opportunistic to appeal to most Parisian socialists.

Garnier-Pagès, Louis—Participated in the Revolution of 1830, became an opposition deputy under the Second Empire, was made a member of the Government of National Defense and consistently opposed Paris socialists.

Girardin, Emile de—One of the creators of modern journalism. His newspapers, La Presse and La Liberté, were important organs of opinion under the Second Empire. The duel to which Vallès refers occurred in 1836, and in it Girardin killed Armand Carel.

Henriette Maréchal—A play by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt presented at the Comédie Française in 1869. It closed ten days after its premiere, primarily due to the hisses of a cabal of Latin Quarter residents who felt the play had been excused from censorship because of the Goncourts’ relationship with the Emperor and Empress.

Hernani—A play by Victor Hugo. Its premiere in 1830 signaled the triumph of Romanticism in the French theatre. Although not a political work, the play acquired strong political meaning during the Second Empire because of the exiled Hugo’s celebrated opposition to Napoleon.

Jacobs—See Montagnards.

Jourde, François—Member of the Commune. Transported to New Caledonia after Bloody Week, he escaped with Rochefort in 1874.

La Cécilia, Napoléon—Mathematics professor made a general by the Commune and charged with defending a large sector of Paris. He was exiled after Bloody Week.

Lachâtre—French dictionary publisher.

Largillière—A revolutionary imprisoned for his part in the June rebellion, Largillière was discovered to be a police spy when the Commune took over police headquarters and examined the secret documents there. He was executed during Bloody Week.

Larousse—French dictionary publisher.

Lecomte—General in command of troops sent to recapture the cannon held by the people of Montmartre on March 18, 1871. He was executed by the mob defending the cannon after his troops refused to obey him.

Leroux, Pierre—Utopian socialist, originally a disciple of Saint-Simon. He was a friend and collaborator of George Sand.

Liberté—Girardin’s newspaper. Its editorial policy supported the “liberal” Empire.

Lisbonne, Maxime—Actor and theatre director made a colonel in the Commune’s army. He was imprisoned after Bloody Week.
Longuet, Charles—Author for the Commune’s *Journal Officiel*, he was exiled to England following Bloody Week. He later married one of Karl Marx’s daughters and became a leader of the Communist movement in France.

Majority—See minority.

Maroteau, Gustave—Radical journalist who was condemned to death after Bloody Week.

Michelet, Jules—Historian, one of most important figures in development of modern historical theory. His courses at the Sorbonne were forbidden by Napoleon III, and Vallès participated in demonstrations protesting his silencing.

Minority—The “moderate” sector of the Commune to which Vallès belonged, consistently outvoted by the more radical majority.

Montagnards—The “men of the mountain” during the French Revolution, so called because they sat on the highest benches at meetings of the government. Their name came to be synonymous with “radical left,” for included in their number were such total revolutionaries as Danton, Marat and Robespierre.

Murger, Henri—Author of *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, in which he romanticized the lives of artists, authors and other Parisian outcasts.

National Defense, Government of—Provisional Republic established after the capture of Napoleon III to continue the struggle against the Prussians.

Noir, Louis—Brother of Victor Noir (below).

Noir, Victor—Journalist killed in a duel by Pierre Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon III.

Odeon—The Odeon Theatre, situated in the Latin Quarter. References to the Odeon locate the action in the section of Paris inhabited primarily by students and intellectuals.

Ollivier, Emile—Republican deputy who, during the Second Empire, fought against arbitrary rule and the policies of Rouher. Asked to form a government in early 1870, he was in charge of containing the demonstrators at Victor Noir’s funeral and was an important minister at the time of Sedan.

Orsini—Italian revolutionary who, during the Second Empire, attempted to assassinate Napoleon III by bombing the imperial carriage.

Paturol, Jérôme—A character created by Louis Reybaud to satirize the bourgeois mentality as applied to politics. He appears in *Jérôme Paturol à la recherche d’une position sociale* (1843) and *Jérôme Paturol à la recherche de la meilleure des républiques* (1848).

Pélagier, Aimable Jean Jacques—French colonial officer in command of French forces attacking Sebastopol during Crimean War. The Malakoff Tower was the central point of the Russian defense of the city. Pélagier decimated the defenders, took the tower and was made a Marshal of France and duc de Malakoff.

Pelletan, Eugène—Republican opponent of the Empire, former collaborator of Girardin and prominent member of the Government of National Defense.

Picard, Ernest—One of five Republican deputies elected in 1857. He was a member of the Government of National Defense and was renowned for his puckish eloquence.

Planché, Gustave—Prominent literary critic whose principal works are *Portraits littéraires* and *Nouveaux portraits littéraires*.

Proudhon, Charles—Utopian socialist and theorist of “mutualism,” which called for equitable redistribution of property rather than abolition of private ownership. Proudhonism was probably the most influential doctrine among French workers during the last years of the Second Empire.
Pyat, Félix—Author, journalist and revolutionary, friend of Louis Blanc and one of the leaders of French socialists under the Second Empire. He participated in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, was elected a member of the Commune and escaped to England after Bloody Week.

Ranc, Arthur—Vigorous opponent of the Empire, he was elected Deputy of the Government of National Defense, resigned in protest of the peace treaty with Prussia, was elected a member of the Commune, then resigned to protest the Commune’s declaration of its willingness to execute hostages. He escaped to Belgium after being condemned to death following Bloody Week.

Ranvier, Gabriel—Member of the Commune, member of Committee of Public Safety, Mayor of XXth District. He was considered primarily responsible for the massacre of rue Haxo. Ranvier escaped to England after Bloody Week.

Rigault, Raoul—Prefect of Police for Commune and subsequently prosecutor for Committee of Public Safety. He was considered the most ruthless of the communards; he ordered the arrest of the archbishop of Paris and thousands of other Parisians suspected of working against the Revolution. He was executed during Bloody Week.

Rochefort, Henri—Satirist prominent under the Second Empire. After Figaro, under government pressure, fired him, he founded the Lanterne to continue his attacks against the Emperor. Imprisoned after Victor Noir’s death and released after the battle of Sedan to help form the Government of National Defense, Rochefort was transported to New Caledonia after Bloody Week. He escaped from the penal colony in 1874.

Rouher, Eugène—One of Louis-Napoleon’s original supporters. His service in various cabinet posts earned him the sobriquet “vice-emperor without responsibilities.”

Rue—Vallés’ first newspaper, founded in June, 1867, and forced to cease publication a few months later.

Sapia—One of the leaders of the leftist attack on the Hotel de Ville on January 22, 1871. He was killed by Breton mobiles during the battle.

Sedan—Battle in September, 1870, in which the Prussian forces captured what was in effect the entire French army along with its emperor, Napoleon III.

Simon, Jules—Professor of philosophy elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1848. After refusing to swear allegiance to the Second Empire following the coup d’état, Simon became a leader of republican opposition to Napoleon. Re-elected to the Chamber in 1867, Simon remained what he had always been—a moderate interested primarily in education who had little appeal for committed socialists.

Taschereau—Journalist who authored the “Taschereau document” published in 1848, which purported to prove that in 1839 Blanqui had betrayed his political comrades to the police. The accusation almost certainly had no basis in fact.

Thiers, Adolphe—Historian and politician. As leader of the regular government during the Commune, Thiers was the principal enemy of Vingras and his comrades. Thiers had been a prominent member of the government since the Restoration and had attempted in vain to persuade Louis-Philippe to leave Paris during the February Revolution of 1848. Able to put his own advice into practice in March, 1871, he withdrew the government to Versailles and commanded the brutal siege and conquest of the Commune. Ironically, Thiers was also the author of a monumental history of the French Revolution that was influential among Parisian activists.

Thomas, Clément—Commander of the national guard in June, 1848. Although an exiled opponent of the Empire, he was recognized and denounced for his part in repressing the June rebellion on March 18, 1871, which led to his execution by a mob.

Tolain, Henri—Louis—First director of the French branch of the Paris police force.
the International. A pronounced advocate of syndicalism, Tolain spoke against the Commune after being elected to the National Assembly in 1871, but nevertheless considered himself a partisan of the workers until his death in 1897.

Trochu, Louis—General in charge of defending Paris under the Government of National Defense, a position in which he displayed no energy, courage or intelligence.

Vermorel, Eugène—Journalist and revolutionary. One of the first propagandists of Marxism. Vermorel died on the barricades during Bloody Week.

Villemessant, Jean Cartier de—Founder and editor of Figaro, the Second Empire’s most successful and brilliant newspaper.

La Villette fire station—Attacked by Blanquists on August 14, 1870, in an attempt to raise the city against the government.

Vinoy, Joseph—Leader of the defense of Paris after Trochu’s dismissal on January 22, 1871; general in command of Versailles’ troops during the Commune.

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THE INSURRECTIONIST

AFTERWORD
by Sandy Petrey
To the dead of 1871

To All Those
who, victims of social injustice,
took arms against a poorly made world
and formed,
under the flag of the Commune,
the great federation of sadness,
I dedicate this book.

JULES VALLÉS

Paris, 1885
I THEY MAY BE right when they say I'm a coward, all those red caps and black shoes under the Odeon.

I've been a proc for weeks now, and I feel neither remorse nor pain; I am not angry and I am not ashamed.

I used to insult school kidney beans; it seems that the quality of the beans they grow around here is higher than the average. I gobble up huge servings, lick the plate and lick it again.

The other day the dining hall was completely quiet when I shouted as I used to at Richfeu's, "Waiter, I'll have another helping!"

Everybody turned around, people laughed.

I laughed too—I'm steadily acquiring the blithe unconcern of galley slaves and the cynicism of convicts, I'm getting to like my cell and I'm drowning my heart in a mug of watered-down wine—I intend to love my feeding trough.

I was hungry for so long!

I used to tighten my belt to choke off the growling hunger gnawing at my entrails, I used to rub my belly without making it shine in hopes of a square meal; I did that kind of thing so many times that I'm as happy as a bear rolling in grapes now that I can lubricate my dry guts with hot gravy.

It's a little like the joy you feel when a wound has healed enough to start tickling.

No matter what, my face is not greenish now, my eyes are not stuck deep in my skull: I frequently dribble egg into my beard.

That beard never used to be combed; my fingers would roam through it like a barbarian army looking for food when I thought about my poverty and my impotence.

Now I keep it trimmed and sleek . . . I do the same for my crowning glory and, a few Sundays ago, I stood before
the mirror, shed the last veils and felt my pride poke out when I saw that my belly was beginning to poke out.

My father was more courageous, and I remember seeing hatred flash in his eyes when he was a schoolmaster; but he didn’t play at revolution, he never lived through an uprising, never shouted the call to arms or studied in the school of insurrection and gun battles.

But I have—and in this institution I found the peace of a sanatorium, the bread of a soup kitchen and the guaranteed daily ration of a hospital.

One of the old men from Farreyrolles saw Waterloo, and the other evening he told me that on the night of the battle, while walking by a bar near La Haye Sainte before it was over, he fell against a wooden table, threw his gun down and refused to go a step farther.

The colonel had called him a coward.

"Okay, I’m a coward, so what? The good Lord and the emperor have both had it. . . . I’m hungry and thirsty!"

And he had looked for his life in the cupboard of the inn’s dining room, there among the corpses; and never, he said, had he had a better meal. He found the meat juicy and the wine cool. Then he stretched out and made a pillow of his pack, and his snores accompanied the cannon’s roars.

My own mind goes to sleep away from combat and noise; the memory of the past now vibrates in my heart only as the rolling sound of a drum, moving away and finally dying, vibrates in the heart of a fugitive.

The prey of “To Let” signs, forced for years to accept any kind of hole as home, forced by fear of insomnia and the landlady to go to those holes only when the clock guaranteed darkness; an escapist from the country, who needed more air than most and whose nose was given only poisonous exhalations, trapped in houses with lead roofs; a starving man who never ate his fill, though he had by nature the appetite of a wolf—

that’s the guy who, one fine morning, found himself sure of his bread and bed, sure of linen without stains, sure of sleeping without bedbugs and of awakening without creditors.

And the ferocious Vingtras has rage in his heart no more, he has his nose in his plate, a napkin in a ring and a handsome nickel silver table setting.

He’ll even run through a Benedicite for you as well as the next man; he has a certain solemn air about him when he says that it’s not at all displeasing to the authorities.

After the meal he gives thanks to God (always in Latin), slips his hand up the back of his vest to loosen the buckle, undoes a button in front and covers everything with his frock coat—chosen from the dead man’s wardrobe and adjusted to fit him the way it fit Dad. Then, his guts filled, his lips greasy, followed by the division in his charge, he sets out on the road through the Upper Form courtyard, which dominates the countryside like the battlements of a feudal castle.

From that height, at certain times of the day, the sky feels to me like a dress made of soft silk, and the breeze tickles my neck like feathers.

Never have I had before me so much sweetness and so much serenity!

Evening The little room at the end of the hall where the proctors can work or daydream when they are free overlooks a plain filled with trees and crisscrossed by flowing water.

On the breeze comes a sea smell that salts my lips, refreshes my eyes and calms my heart. That heart barely quivers to the call of my thoughts, moves no more than the curtain in the window hit by a breath of wind.

I forget what business I’m in, I forget the snotty brats in my care. . . . I also forget pain and revolt.

I don’t turn toward where Paris is roaring, I don’t stare at the horizon to find the smoky place that must be the battlefield—I have discovered, over there, far away, a willow grove and
an orchard in bloom, and that's where I focus my moist eyes, that's what sends such sweetness to my nose.

Yes, the Odeon crew was right: dirty coward!

When I leave the school I'm in peaceful, sleepy streets, and I have to walk only a short distance to find a brook I can stroll beside without thinking of anything, a place where I can let my drowsy eyes follow the adventures of a branch or a clump of grass carried along by the current.

At the end of the walk there's a refreshment stand whose sign is a string of big apples; for a few cents I drink lovely cider the color of gold and get slightly tipsy.

Yes! Dirty coward!

But, on the other hand, I never had any luck.

By bourgeois chance, this school is filled with air and light; it's a former convent with big gardens and big windows; round disks of sun fall into the rooms; when the casements are open, the dormitories admit echoes of foliage, quivers of nature already reddened by autumn, a few warm tones of bronze and brass.

I did not make a bad impression on these students, accustomed as they are to being watched by novices barely out of school or by stony old procès dumber than career sergeants.

They greeted me a little like an officer of irregular troops accidentally called up by the death of his father—a regular army man with many service ribbons; besides, I have the Parisian aureole. That's enough to keep me from being hated in this world of young prisoners.

My colleagues also considered me a nice guy, though not enough of a drinker—they spend their free hours in a small, wet, dark café where they get smashed by guzzling beer, sipping spiked coffee and breaking in pipes.

I don't smoke and I never drink.

As for the time I can call my own, I spend it by the stove.

in my empty study, a book in my hand, or else in the philosophy class, a notebook on my knees.

The professor is the son-in-law of the chief district educational officer himself, and he's flattered to see this jaunty, black-bearded Parisian sitting on a bench like a young kid, listening to him speak on the properties of the soul. Those properties gave me hell when I was trying for the baccalauréat and I can't let them screw me up again when I shoot for the licence. I need to know how many of them they can count in Calvados: six, seven, eight or fewer, or more!

And I follow the lessons diligently so as to be well-informed about the philosophy of the region.

October 15 Today is the opening of the Faculty of Letters; the welcoming speech will be given by the professor of history.

But I've met that professor before!

He's the one who came to the Bonaparte school as the third year normalien to teach us in the Upper Form when I was in the Rhetoric class.

It was in 1849—his mouth was, I must say, full of daring, revolutionary words. I even remember that he used to go to the café with Anatoly, whose older brother was an acquaintance of his, and that he raised his head when he heard me insult Béranger's coat while arguing at the next table.

He had noticed me without catching my name; but he remembered the incident, and when I went up to him as we were leaving the lecture hall, he recognized me at once.

"So what are you doing? I heard you'd been exiled or killed in a duel."

I let him know to what extent I felt out of it, resigned to my fate, happy with discipline, content to live with my hand on the cider corkscrew or on the kidney bean spoon and my eyes on flowing water.

"Damn! Damn!" he said, like a doctor hearing bad news.

"Come see me, we'll talk awhile. Sometimes I like to get away from this bunch of donkeys and scoundrels."

He pointed at the authorities and all his colleagues.
That was the successful academician talking!
Crap! Why did I have to run into him!
I was living calmly, I was resting deliciously; he put fire
back into my belly, and when, on Sunday, I was loosening my
belt over dessert and defending myself against emotion, he
shook me: "Surely you're not going to become a bourgeois
and get fat! I'd rather you insult my June cross."

I had in fact insulted him because of his decoration the first
day I went to his house, then I had headed for the door.
He detained me.
"I was twenty, I was with the whole crowd from the Ecole
Normale... Not knowing what the inscription meant, I
put myself on Cavaignac's side—I thought he was a republi-
can. And I was the first to enter the Pantheon, where the work-
ers had barricaded themselves. I was sent to announce the news
to the Chamber of Deputies and they tied their ribbon onto
my buttonhole. But, I swear to you that this is true, not only
did I kill no one, I saved the lives of several fighters at the risk of
my own. Stay, go! You must know that people can change.
You maintain yourself are no longer what you were."

He held out his hand, I took it and we were friends.
I also became the pet of his white-haired colleague, old
Machar, who had buried himself in the provinces after having
his hour of glory in Paris.
"Which of you is named Vingtras?" he asked the proctors
gathered for the year's second meeting.
I moved away from the group.
"Where are you from? Where did you study?... There?
You've at least finished there, too, I bet."
And he made me read aloud my essay, my "homework."

"You, sir, are a writer!"
He threw that at my head without warning, and, as he was
leaving, he asked me to walk him home. I told him my story.
"Hm, hmmm," he said, nodding his head. "If it were just
comrade Lacin and myself, you'd get your degree in August.
But will you even be here that long? Will the headmaster let
you stay? You look like a man, and he needs leg-dogs."

"I'm trying hard to be small, I've decided to be a coward!
"Maybe so, but it's easy to see that you're not, and the rats
must be able to guess you despise them."
The old master was right! It didn't do me a bit of good to
pretend I was asleep, grow a pot belly and recite the Ben-
dicite!
The faculty's sanctimonious prigs, the school's headmaster
and the chaplain decided that I would have to go. My boa's
bristles, my clear eye, the click of my heels no matter how
softly I walked insulted their smooth chins, their squinty eyes
and the drag of their shoes across the floor.
Not being able to accuse me of tardiness or drunkenness,
they had a brilliant idea—the Jesuits!
They organized a secret conspiracy against me.

Midnight The dormitory where I burned the midnight oil
became the terrain where the conspirators laid an ambush.
It lends itself to an uprising by its monkish construction.
Once each brother had a cell with a window on the roof; now
each pupil has the same, so you can't see anyone from inside
the cubicles. The proctor hears the noise but can't see the
gestures.
One fine evening there was an insurrection inside those
wooden walls: raps on the partitions, whistles, groans, screams
—all so funny that, damn it, I felt like joining in.
So I did. I rapped, whistled, groaned and screamed, in a
shrill soprano voice, "Down with the Proc!"
It was the first time I had been alive since my arrival.
There I was, in my shirt, in the middle of the cell, beating
the chamber pot with a candlestick, imitating a rooster and
a pig, always yelling, "Down with the Proc!"

The door was pushed open.
The headmaster himself. He looked dumbfounded when he
saw me with my shirttails flapping, my bare feet on the bare
floor, and I did not notice the electric light.
floor, my chamber pot in one hand and my candle holder in the other, and he stammered in a most confused way, “You don’t... you d... you don’t... you don’t hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“That revolt! Those screams!”

“Screams? Revolt?”

I rubbed my eyes and tried to look confused and bewildered.... Oh, he saw perfectly well what he was up against, and he left, white as the chamber pot. There would be no more uprisings in the dormitory, the danger was past!

I got back in bed, distressed that the riot had ended.

But I knew perfectly well that I had been screwed. I intended to have a few flings before they kicked me out.

I just got my chance.

The professor of the first form is sick. It’s customary for the proctor to replace the teacher when the latter is, for some extraordinary reason, unavoidably absent.

So I’m the one who’ll give the class tonight, I’m the one who’ll stand behind the lectern.

Here I am.

The students are waiting, excited as they always are at the prospect of anything new and different. How am I going to handle myself, me, the talented speaker, the professors’ pet, the Parisian.

I begin.

“Gentlemen:

“By chance, I am to replace your honorable professor, M. Jacquau. But I trust I may be permitted not to share his opinion on the instructional method to be followed.

“My personal opinion is that you must never learn anything, you must learn nothing recommended to you by the administration. (Noise and movements in the center.) I feel I can be more useful to your future by advising you to play dominoes, chess and cards—the younger children will be allowed to stick paper up a fly’s ass. (Various reactions.)

“Gentlemen, I insist, silence! It is not necessary to think in order to learn a little Demosthenes or some Virgil, but when you have to win a card game, when you need to put a king in check or impale flies without making them suffer, calm thought is indispensable—the strictest concentration is unquestionably due to the innocent insect who, gentlemen, is going to probe your curiosity, if I may be allowed to use the expression. (Prolonged sensation.)

“I should like to express the hope that the time we are to spend together will not be wasted.”

You get the picture!

That very evening I was informed that my services would no longer be required.

......

II Here I am, back on the streets of Paris, only forty francs in my pocket and blacklisted by every university in the two kingdoms of France and Navarre.

Where to turn?

I am no longer the same man; eight months of the provinces have transmogrified me.

I had lived for ten years like a drunkard who, afraid of the letdown the morning after his binge, takes a little hair of the dog that bit him, grabs white wine as soon as he gets up and always keeps a bottle within reach of his trembling hand. My own spit made me drunk.

And most often all I got was another test of my fortitude.

Even those to whom I distributed the alms of the gaiety that concealed my troubles or took their attention away from theirs, rather than understand and thank me, they called me an Auvergnat—and cruel besides. Vermin in their brains and fear in their hearts, they never saw that I was putting irony over pain as men cover the ravages of cancer with a false nose, never realized that emotion was gnawing away at my entrails all the
time I was numbing our common misery by beating it with my jokes, exactly as we smash a window with our fists when suffocating in a closed room.

All my efforts really did a lot of good!

What did I do after returning from the provinces? . . . I no longer know. I lived like a beast, as I had back there, but without the joy granted by a beast’s pasture and freshly littered stable.

Am I going to go all the way to the grave without doing anything but defend myself against life? Will I ever leave the shadows, fight at least one battle in the sun?

To hell with it! Let them cry treason if they like!

I’m going to try to sell eight hours of my time a day to earn a few pieces of bread and a little peace of mind.

After all, Arnould, who is an honorable man, became a clerk at the Town Hall. When I ran into Lisette the other morning, she told me about it.

Now I have to get recommendations to add to my application. . . . One more vow to trample underfoot!

Never mind.

I broke a promise when I became a proc—I’ll break another one when I go and beg for the signature of the people who tried to murder us on the Second of December.

Poor fool! Instead of gaining ground I’ve lost it, and I just found gray hairs in my head!

It’s done. A general in the Guard, a bookseller to the Tuileries and one of my father’s old headmasters each furnished a couple of lines of recommendation.

That was enough. I have been appointed assistant, at a hundred francs a month, in a municipal building that looks like a shack and is miles from anywhere.

I rushed over, climbed the stairs and asked for the head of the office.

A slightly hunchbacked man with glasses received me. “Okay, you’ll be in births.”

He led me to the registry and handed me over to a functionary who looked me up and down, motioned for me to sit down and asked if I wrote well.

“Not very.”

“Let’s see.”

I rammed a pen into the inkwell. I rammed it too hard, and when I took it out, I splashed a monstrous blot on a page of the big register lying open before the man.

His gestures expressed the most abject despair. “It’s right on the name! We’ll have to do it over in the margin!”

He ran to the window, leaned out as far as he could, waved his arms, screamed loudly.

Was he calling for help? Did he feel an attack coming on?

Did he want to have me arrested?

Who would answer his call? The doctor, the policeman?

No. It was a collier, a wine merchant and a midwife who, five seconds later, rushed into the office and asked in quaking voices what all this was about.

“It’s about this gentleman here who decided to start work by messing up my book and now you all have to sign in the margin so the child will have legal status.”

He turned furious eyes at me. “Did you hear me? Le-gal sta-tus! Do you at least know what that means?”

“Yes, I studied law.”

“I should have known!” And he cackled. “That’s the way they all are. Education is death on registries!”

More caterwauling and the noise of heavy shoes, another midwife, collier and wine merchant. My colleagues sent me into the thick of it.

“Question the declarer yourself.”

How to go about it? What to say?

“You’re here about a child, Madam?”
He shrugged his shoulders and looked as if he were going to give the whole thing up as a bad job. "And why the devil do you think she's here? Still, you may be able to do something! Check the child's sex."

"Check the child's sex? And how do I do that?"

He adjusted his glasses and stared at me as if he thought he was dreaming; he seemed to be wondering if my education were so retarded and my modesty so advanced that I did not know how to tell boys from girls.

I made signs to show that I knew perfectly well.

He sighed with relief and addressed the midwife. "Undress the child. You, sir, look... You can't see anything from over there, come closer!"

"It's a boy."

"You said it!" declared the father, swaggering a little and winking at the collier.

So there I was, for all practical purposes a wet nurse.

I was constrained by the rules of politeness to help open diapers, take out pins, unswalluddle the brat and give a little tickle under the chin when it cried too much.

Fortunately, my stay at Entêtard's had given me a "manner," and my style became famous in the quarter, as famous as my shirt measurements had once been. First-place Vingtras!

My colleagues are not really impressive, but there is nothing evil about them. They have none of the yeast of bile and bitterness fermenting in always jealous, ever fearful, constantly watched members of the teaching profession.

They are not overly brutal when they make me aware of my inferiority. My comrade hasn't pouted or grumbled for two days now.

"All in all, what did they teach you in school? Latin? Great, you're prepared to serve mass. You'd better learn to cross, round off and curl instead."

And he offered me advice on how to do the tail of long letters and the curve of round letters. We even stayed after the office had closed to work on my "English hand," over which I was sweating blood.

One day an old comrade, one of our band of republicans, saw me through the window.

"There was a time when you made revolutions, now you're making capital letters!"

Okay, fine, if that's the way you want it! But once my capital letters are made, I'm free, free until the next day.

My evenings are my own, my lifelong dream! And if I just get up with the workers I can get in two hours of fresh work before it's time to go verify the sex of screaming babies.

I undiaper them, but I've undiapered myself as well, and I can show anybody who cares to look that I am a man.

The Mürger Funeral. I asked for time off to march in the funeral procession of a famous man.

I wanted to see the crowds of celebrities who were bound to come running; I also wanted to hear what they would say over his grave.

They whimpered and sniffed, that's all there was to it.

They mentioned a mistress and a puppy that the deceased had been very fond of, they threw roses on his tombstone, flowers in his hole and holy water on his coffin—either he had believed in God or had been forced to pretend he did.

Some uniforms and rifles in formation were also in his procession: the squad that's due decorated men.

He had the cross; it was like the medal of a blind man, an admission ticket to charity. Legionnaires are not allowed to starve; remaining poor, he'd had to use the red ribbon to tie up his glory like a horse's tail.

Walking home, I was pensive; suddenly I felt my guts knot up in anger. It took a week for me to understand what had been moving in me; one morning, I figured it out.
It had been my book, the son of my suffering, which had given signs of life next to the coffin of the Bohemian buried with great pomp and glorified in the cemetery after a life without happiness and a death without peace.

To work, then! And you're about to see what I've got in my belly when famine isn't roaming about in it like the hand of an abortionist trying to scratch and pop the ovaries with its black fingernails!

I, who am saved, shall write the story of those who are not, the story of the slobs who haven't found the way.

It'll be a real foul-up if I can't sow revolt in that little book without anyone suspecting that there's a weapon under the rags hanging like those at the morgue, a weapon to be seized by men who have kept their rage or who haven't been degraded by poverty.

They imagined a Bohemia populated by cowards—I'm going to show them one filled with desperate, threatening rebels.

III It's gloomy in my room, a thirty-franc room with a "view"—of an alley leading from a courtyard where, above a pile of garbage, is a pigeon roost whose cooing plunges me into despair.

I hear nothing but that irritating music and the sobs of a woman living near me in a dark closet she cannot pay for. She weeps—a gray-haired teacher nobody wants anymore trying to find pupils at ten sous a lesson.

Poor lady! I ran into her the other evening when, for the same price, she was offering her aged caresses to some boys from the military hospital and opening her dress to let them take her breasts.

I didn't like the place, I wanted to leave. It seemed to me that the wall let in an odor that poisoned my thoughts.

I had to stay, though, and not give notice, unless I was willing to hand over two weeks' rent for nothing. So I arranged my life—the account book is there near the scrapbook—my budget was inflexible. All I had to do was bend my head over the paper and stuff cotton into my ears and I was deaf to my neighbor's gasps of sorrow and the pigeons' whirs of love.

One of the pigeons often went to the closet window for the few shredded bread crumbs dropped there by the pauper's hands, hands still smelling of sweat oozed by the hospital attendants' passion.

At school the dove had been the bird of voluptuous pleasure gorging itself on the shoulders of goddesses and poets. Here it strutted and sharpened its beak on the window of a woman with kidney stones. Gemuere palumbae.

I got up at six, wrapped my feet in the remains of an overcoat because the floor was cold, and worked until I had to set out for the office.

I went back to work at five and stopped at eight, no later. Evenings frightened me in that tenement on rue Saint-Jacques, close to the square that once held the guillotine, right next to the military hospital, very near the home for deaf mutes. No doubt about it, the neighborhood was not the cheeriest place in the world!

"But when you stand at the window you can see the Pantheon, where one day you will sleep if you become a great man," Arnould said jokingly while visiting me.

I don't believe in the Pantheon, I don't dream of having the name of "great man," I don't want to be immortal after my death—I ask only to live while I'm alive!

I'm making progress, but the road is still very dirty and very sad.

The woman next door has grown bolder: now she gets tipsy and brings men home to drink with her.
One day one of the drunkards refused to pay her a single sou and tried to beat her. She called for help.

I twisted the drunk’s arm—he had picked up a knife from a cheese plate and was about to stick it into the woman’s belly. I pushed him through the street door and closed it behind him; he hammered on it with his fist for more than fifteen minutes, shouting all the while, “Come on, come on down, tough guy!”

They wasted no time kicking the teacher out, “though she had been paying regular for two weeks,” as the landlady said with a trace of regret in her voice. Now nothing but the pigeons, who love one another and leave piles of dung on my windowsill, since they can no longer find bread next door.

My work is not going at all well. It's freezing in this room, and it takes my little pile of coal a long time to start burning. I shiver while striking the matches, and if I have the courage to sit at my table without a fire in the fireplace, little by little goose bumps come in and thought goes out.

For a long time I thought about what I could do. I went to Sainte-Geneviève to search among the books for new ways to light fires, ways that might spare me long periods in my nightshirt in front of the hearth filled with smoke but not flames, the morning chill on my bare legs.

But I failed, and the wind is from the north. I’ve done nothing for a week—nothing but make notes with a pencil, which I can do by barely sticking my arms out from under the covers.

I tried to go to the library to write. But, if I’m too cold here, I’m too hot there. In that heavy, clammy atmosphere my ideas soften and fade like red meat in a boiling pot, and I lay my head on my blank paper and snooze. An old soldier insolently comes over and wakes me up.

Will I be able to get started on my book before spring?

Yes I will, damn it! I’ll go bankrupt if I have to!

I just left the offices of Dulamon and Co., where I’d been introduced by one of my father’s old colleagues, who sells Latin to children.

We settled on the price of a thick bathrobe with a hood, cord and train. They’re to deliver it in a week for half the agreed-upon price, the other half payable at the end of next month.

Sixty francs all told.

I cooled my heels until delivery day.

That day finally came!

“Take your thirty francs.”

The man pocketed them and left. As for me, I was strutting around in my wool wrap.

Ah! bourgeois who cut it, haberdasher who sold it, you don’t know what you have done! You’ve just given a sentry box to the guard of an army that will one day wage a battle you’ll remember!

If this greatcoat hadn’t been built, I might have retreated before the dark fireplace, fled from my icy cell, called it quits once and for all—I might not have written my book!

The day of reckoning is getting closer. Today’s the twenty-second, the bill is due on the thirtieth.

I took advantage of the fact that it was Sunday, the day I didn’t go to the office, to put the finishing touches on my work and copy the last pages.

Hurry, let’s read it over! Scissors, pins! We have to strike this out, add that on!

I splashed ink everywhere. Whole passages are like rolls of black taffeta over the eyes or like bruises on the navel! I cut myself with the scissors, pricked myself with the pins. Tiny drops of blood dripped onto the pages—it looked like the memoirs of a homicidal ragman.

All because the haberdasher wouldn’t wait! He’d hustle me to the authorities, show them my bill, shout and I’d be wiped out. For I’m an official now, I must honor my signature or run the risk of compromising the government, which doesn’t give
me fifteen hundred francs a year so I can live like a Bohemian.

It's three o'clock. I hear vespers ringing. Not a sound in the
house—except the cough of a consumptive spitting out the
remnants of his last lung.

Oh, how awful it is to be unknown, poor and alone!

Quarter past, half past!
I had my hand over my eyes to keep them from crying. But
I shouldn't be daydreaming. My debt!

I should be setting out for the editor-in-chief of *Figaro*
and trying to get into his home. He can't be found among the
crowd leaving the office during the week; besides, no one
listens to unknowns in that kind of place.

Would he let me in? Wasn't this his day of rest? I'd heard
he loved children and wanted to hug them peacefully, without
being bothered, during his twenty-four-hour vacation.

Oh, what the hell!

How my legs trembled as I went up the stairs!
I rang.

"M. de Villemechant?"

"He's not here. He left for the country a few days ago and
won't be back for another two weeks."

Out of town! . . . But that means I'm done for!

The maid must have read the despair on my face. Besides,
she saw the edge of my rolled, folded manuscript writhing in
agony deep in my pocket.

She didn't close the door and finally decided to tell me that,
in the absence of Villedomant, his son-in-law was available,
that if I wanted to leave my name she'd tell him I had come
and would even give him what I'd brought.

As she said this she glanced at the article, which looked like
a porcupine because of the multitude of pins in it. I took it out
and had her hold it in the middle so as not to prick herself.
She laughed kindly and left with the article in an outstretched
hand.

I was alone for at least fifteen minutes. Finally the door
opened: "But it has teeth, this little contribution has teeth, my
dear sir," said a big bald man shaking his sausage-like fingers.

I stammered excuses.

"It doesn't matter! I saw the title; I read a few lines. The
public will feel its teeth, too. We shall print this, young man.
But really, you'll have to wait awhile. We've got such a back-
log."

Wait? Good Lord! I explained to him that I couldn't wait.
"I have a gambling debt to pay tomorrow, that's why I was so
presumptuous as to come here. . . ."

"Well, well, so you're on the make for the queen of spades?
Do you try to fill inside straightes?"

I didn't know what filling an inside straight was, but I had to
say something, so in a hollow voice I replied, "Yessir, I try to
fill inside straightes."

"Christ, you've got guts!"

Far too many! I've often noticed them, especially when I
don't have anything to eat. "Here, take this note to the cashier.
Give it to him tomorrow and you'll get a hundred francs. It's
our top fee, but your article has balls. So long!"

Balls? Maybe so!
I didn't follow the Sorbonne's recommendations and check
to see if what I wrote was like Pascal or Marmontel, Juvenal or
Paul-Louis Courier, Saint-Simon or Sainte-Beuve. I didn't
respect tropes, fear neologisms or observe the Nestorian order
of accumulating proofs.

I took the pieces of my life and sewed them to pieces of other
lives, laughing when I felt like it, grinding my teeth when
memories of humiliation made my flesh crawl over my bones
like the meat of a cutlet as the blood pours out under the
knife.

But I've just saved the honor of a whole battalion of young
people who had read *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* and who be-
lieved in that carefree, rosy life; poor dupes to whom I shouted the truth.
If they still want to taste that life, it's because they're nothing but potential sawdust for a barroom floor or fair game for Mazas prison. When they reach thirty, suicide or insanity will grab them by the neck, the hospital guard or the prison guard will grab them by the arms, they will die before their time or be dishonored at their time.

I shall not pity them now that I've ripped the bandages from my wounds to show the kind of gash made in a man's heart by ten years of lost youth!

... ...

IV Public readings are in vogue. Beauvallet is to do Hernani at the Casino-Cadet.
A solemn meeting! A great attraction! A protest against the Empire in honor of the author of Châtiments!
But, as in the circus, they need an artist of an inferior breed, a clown or an ape, one who, after the main event, occupies the stage while people put on their hats and call for their carriages.
They offered to let me be the ape. I accepted.

Through which hoop shall I leap? I choose as my title Balzac and His Work.
The stories of Rastignac, Séchard and Rubempré had taken hold of my brain. The Human Comedy is often the drama of life's pains—bread or clothing snatched on credit or paid for in installments, the fever of hunger and the chill of money worries. It's impossible for me not to find something moving to say when I speak of those heroes who are my brothers in ambition and anguish!

The day of the show has arrived—the master and the ape have their names plastered all around.

There'll be a crowd. The bearded veterans of '48 will be there to curl up their lips at Bonaparte every time a hemistich allows them to think they perceive a republican allusion. All the young opposition will be there too: journalists, lawyers, bluestockings who'd take their garter and strangle the emperor if he fell into their red claws, ladies who wear their Sunday hats like helmets.
But, from far away, I saw a crowd milling around a man who had just pasted something on the poster at the Grand-Orient. What was going on?

The reading of Hugo's drama had been forbidden, and the organizers announced that Hernani would be replaced by The Cid.
Many people went home after scornfully spelling out my three syllables, which meant nothing to them.
"Jacques Vingtras?"
"Never heard of him."
Nobody had heard of him except a few men of the press, those from our café who'd made a point of coming and who stayed to see how I'd handle myself, in the hope I'd provoke either hisses or a scandal.
I went to the nearest bar to wait until they'd finished running through alexandrines.
"It's your turn! You're on next!"
I barely had time to scramble up the stairs.
"You're on! You're on!"
I crossed the room; I was on stage.
I took my time, laid my hat on a chair, threw my coat on a piano behind me, slowly pulled off my gloves, stirred a spoon in my glass of sugared water with the concentration of a sorcerer reading something significant in a brew. And I began, no more flustered than if I'd been orating at the café.
"Ladies and Gentlemen . . ."
I found some friendly faces in the audience, I looked at them, spoke to them, the words came out by themselves and were carried by my strong voice to the back of the room. This was the first time I'd spoken in public since the Second of December. That morning I had climbed on benches and paving stones to apostrophize the crowd and shout, "To arms!" I'd harangued a crew of unknown people who passed without stopping.

Today I'm in a black suit before a group of new bourgeois in their best clothes who imagine they've been extremely daring because they came to a poetry reading.

Will they listen and understand?

Napoleon is loathed in this world of Puritans, but no one loves the poor—their style smells more like the guns of June than those of the coup d'état. These gray-mustached vestals of the republican tradition are—as were Robespierre and all the under-Maximilien, their ancestors—grave Bridoisos in the classic mold.

And the white ties there who'd read me were confused, the dogs, by my guerilla attacks, unleashed less against the bust of Badinguet than against the carcass of society as a whole, society as it is, a bitch with nothing but hot lead to throw in the gutter where the poor are writhing in agony and starving to death—crickets whose feet have been cut off by the blade of the plow and who, in the dark night of their life, can't even sound their one little desolate and lonely note!

Only now disdain more than despair was filling my heart and making it burst into sentences I considered eloquent. In the silence it seemed to me they were hitting hard and shining bright.

But they were not barbed with hate.

I was sounding not the call to arms but the charge. I was a drummer escaped from the horrors of a siege who, suddenly carried into the light, cocky and waggish, laughing at the enemy, making fun of the officers' orders, and of passwords, and of discipline, throws his recruit's cap in a ditch, rips off his stripes and drums out the reveille of irony with the enthusiasm of the musicians of Balaklava.

Hell, while I'm at it, I might as well get off my chest everything that's been stifling me.

I forgot dead Balzac in order to speak of the living. I even forgot to insult the Empire and, standing before those fat bourgeois, I waved the black as well as the red flag.

I felt my thoughts rise and my chest expand, I finally filled my lungs with air. I felt goose bumps of pride as I spoke. My joy was almost carnal; it seemed to me that my gestures had never been free until that moment, that they were hanging from the heights of my sincerity to weigh heavily on those heads turned toward me, staring at me with half-open lips and wide-open eyes.

I held those people in the palm of my hand and played whatever brutal games with them my imagination suggested.

Why aren't they getting angry?

It must be that I've kept cool. In order to make a hole in those skulls, I have wielded my arm like the dagger in a Greek tragedy, squirted Latin at them, classicalized my speech—those imbeciles let me insult their religions and their doctrines because I do it in a language that respects their rhetoric, the language hawked by courtroom lawyers and humanities professors. I'm being careful to slip my naked, cruel, insubordinate words between two Villemain-like periods without giving them time to cry out.

Besides, some of them are terrified of me!

A little while ago I split one of their prejudices with a sentence as wicked as a rusty knife. I saw a whole family draw back, stunned; the father was searching for his coat, the daughter was adjusting her shawl. So I directed my flinty gaze toward them and nailed them to their seats with a look laden with threats. Dazed, they sat back down, and I almost burst out laughing.
But it's time to conclude: I consult my peroration, I burn it. The clock's hand has come full circle. . . . I've just finished my hour and begun my life.

People spoke about me for twenty-four hours in a few newspaper offices and a few downtown bars. Those twenty-four hours were enough for a man well-built and well-tempered like me: my neck was out of the vise and my head out of the bag.

So it was a good day's work, my spit washed off the filth of recent years the way Poupart's blood washed off the dung of our youth.

I might not have taken that opportunity. In any case it would never have been offered to me if I'd stayed on the other side of the water, if I hadn't gone to the café frequented by a few ambitious pen-pushers.

Because I want to eat the food served there, because I occasionally got drunk and, being drunk, displayed daring and determination, because I left the world of dedicated, dreary work to waste time with those time-wasters, I finally succeeded in blowing a hole in the shadows and ripping through the silence.

It was necessary to have a gold piece to spend every now and then. I had one on payday.

How I bless thy name, little 1,500-franc job, who didst let me spend ten francs the first of each month and three francs other days, who didst make me look a steady sort and who didst consequently get me lessons at a hundred sous an hour—the same ones that for a long time had brought me fifty centimes!

That little nothing job saved my life; thanks to it I'm eating this morning.

For my lecture brought not one cent. The director paid me generously in food; last night we had a fine dinner.

But today my pocket is empty. I'm no richer than if I'd been hissed off the stage. My gloves, my boots, my stiff shirt cost me my eyeteeth. How will I eat tonight?

Around nine o'clock my stomach began to send up infernal rumblings. I went to the Café de l'Europe, where some of my friends had credit, and I was prevailed upon to accept a bavaroise—since they served rolls with it.

The next day, as usual, I went to the office. My co-workers, who saw me coming, came to their doors.

"What's up?"

"Monsieur Vingras, the chief wants a word with you."

From the hall, in fact, I could make out the chief waiting for me behind the half-open door to the marriage room.

He had me come into his office.

"Undoubtedly you can guess what I want to speak to you about?"

"?

"No? Well, this is it. Sunday, at the Casino, you gave a speech that was actually an offense against the government. At least those were the words used by the Academy Inspector in his report to the prefect. Personally, I must express my astonishment at seeing you compromise an administration at whose head I have the honor to serve and a position which, as you told me yourself, is, though meager, your only way of earning a living. Officially, I am to warn you that you are from this moment on forbidden to speak in public, and I am further to beg you to give or promise me your resignation."

Not speak in public—I could take that; after all, the blow had already landed, and besides, I'd get the benefit of being persecuted.

But resign! Lose my little job! That idea chilled my spine. All the drafts of articles that promised me a glorious future weren't worth a single bowl of soup. And I had gotten used to soup by this time, I'd have a lot of trouble going more than one day without eating!

There was no way out, though. I had to leave. I grew pale as I shook the hand of that fine gentleman and said farewell to that shack.
V What to do?

Here I am thrown into politics once more. But now I don’t have to be afraid of ruining my father, I don’t have the chain of a family around my leg. I’m my own master. All I have to do is let the world see if I have talent and courage!

Poor boy! Believe that and drink water, that dirty water you lapped up for such a long time, leaning over cracked jugs in boardinghouses like a stray dog wetting its tongue in a gutter—water that will, in spite of yesterday’s triumph, become your drink once more if you intend to remain a free man.

Pulled out of the mud? Come on! Only your head is in the air, the rest is still stuck in the slime.

You have a right to complain. You were dying without anyone seeing you suffer. People will watch you kick off now!

Girardin told Vermorel to let me know he wanted to see me. “Tell him to come Sunday.”

I went.

He made me wait two hours and would have forgotten all about me and left me in the empty library, which was growing darker as dusk fell, if I hadn’t opened the door, gone up the stairs, forced my way through and burst into the study where he was hurling reproaches at three or four individuals, their heads bowed, all trying to blame the others, like schoolchildren afraid of their teacher.

He barely noticed me and kept shouting at the people there—one or two of them had white hair—as if they were lackeys. He got rid of me—my turn now—with a short sentence: “Every morning at seven o’clock I’m available. Tomorrow if you want.”

He dismissed me with a bow, and that was that.

I hadn’t expected such an arid greeting. Most of all, I hadn’t thought I’d be present to see the staff being treated like inconsequential flunkies.

Six A.M. It took me forty-five minutes to get to the outer door of his house; I crossed the courtyard, went up to the porch, pushed open the large stained-glass door and found myself as lost as if I were still in the street. Some servants were yawning, opening windows and shaking rugs. I asked them to inform Jean, the valet, so he could announce me to his master.

At last I was in his presence.

What an ashen face! What a sinister Pierrot mask!

The cadaverous features of an aged coquette or a wizened child, a face marked with splotches and pitted with eyes reflecting objects as starkly as polished glass!

It looks like a skull whose empty eye sockets some joking art student plugged with two white poker chips, before putting it on top of that cassock-like dressing gown collapsed beside the desk that’s covered with torn papers and scissors open to bite.

No one would think there was an important man inside!

But that wool sack contains one of the century’s prime movers, a man made of nerves and claws who’s been poking his muzzle and paws into everything important for thirty years. But, like the cat family, he remains still when he doesn’t smell prey close enough to scratch or grasp.

So here he is, this idea producer who had one every day when there was an uprising every night, the man who took Cavaignac by his protective collar and threw him off the horse that had kicked over the June barricades. He assassinated that glory as he had already killed a republican in a famous duel.

No longer can you see, either under his skin or on his hands, a trace of blood—his own or that of others!

No, it’s not a skull, it’s a sphere of ice in which a knife has chipped out human features, in which a rough blade has engraved the egoism and disgust that produce splotches and shadows as a true thaw shades white frost.

Only everything that evokes cold wanness could express the nature of that face.
It left some of its spleen in my soul, some of its snow in my veins.

I was shivering when I left. Outside, it seemed to me that my blood vessels weren't so blue beneath my brown skin. My lips were pinched, and my white eyes rolled back to stare at the sky.

Besides, in my person I had brought him a poor, simple man. He had guessed that right away. I saw him—and I felt that he already held me in contempt.

I was going to ask for his opinion, his advice, I was even going to request a little corner of his paper where I could lodge my thoughts and, pen in hand, continue the battle begun with my lecture.

What's wrong with him?

Speaking telegraphically, he put me in my place with two frozen words.

"Irregular! Dissonant!"

All my questions, for which I sometimes insisted on answers, provoked only that monotonous mumble. I could drag nothing else from his padlocked lips.

"Irregular! Dissonant!"

When I met Vermorel that evening, I told him about my visit and vomited up my anger.

He had seen Girardin and abruptly interrupted me: "My dear fellow, he accepts only people whom he can make into flunkies or cabinet ministers, only those who will dance to his tune . . . no one else, ever. We talked about your interview. Do you want to hear what he said about you? 'Your Vingtras? A poor devil who can't help having talent, an angry man with his own trumpet, he'll insist on playing it in the name of his ideas and for his glory. Toot, toot, tooooooot! Does he think I'm going to put him in with my clarinet blowers so no one can hear them?'"

"He said that?"

"Word for word."

I went to bed on that and spent the night rehashing the conversation that made me quiver with pride . . . and tremble with fear.

I didn't sleep. The next morning I sprang out of bed, my mind made up. I dressed, put on my gloves and set out for Girardin's house.

He had removed his mask for Vermorel. I was going to ask him to take it off for me. If he refused, I intended to rip it off for him.

"You, sir, are the prisoner of your personality, and it sentences you to live apart from our papers. The political press will evict you, the others as well as I, you understand. We require disciplined men skilled at tactics and maneuvers . . . you would never submit, never!"

"But my convictions?"

"Your convictions? They must adopt the current rhetoric, the line of defense that's in the air. But you have your own tongue; you couldn't rip it out of your mouth even if you tried. Nothing can be done, nothing! I'd never take you even if you paid me!"

"All right," I said, desperately. "I no longer propose myself as a polemicist with a red cockade. All I ask is to be a literary contributor, just let me sell you the talent you say I have."

He put his smooth chin in his hand and shook his head. "Not that either, my dear sir. While you executed variations on the little flowers of the forests or the little sisters of the poor, your toy horn would be blowing away. Even if you didn't want it to. Besides, you know as well as I do that it's not so much male words as a virile accent that frightens the Empire. I would be shut down as quickly for one of your articles on the Romainville fair as for someone else's article on Rouher's government."

"So I'm condemned to obscurity and poverty!"

"Write books! Not that I'm sure people would print them or that they wouldn't be prosecuted. Better find an inheritance.
instead, or go into stocks or banking ... or revolutions! Take your choice.”

“I will.”

VI “Yes, you’re as stupid as a cow! Oh my children, what a creature this Vingtras is! Here he is peeing from both eyes because he can’t write articles on the social revolution in Girardin’s rag .... And you say he doesn’t even want your little flowers of the forests? Okay, I’ll take them myself; a hundred francs a bunch, one every Saturday.”

It was Villemessant who met me on a corner, asked what I was doing and made this offer, after bumping me with his belly and insisting I was as stupid as a cow.

“Oh my children, what a creature this Vingtras is!”

An hour later I happened to run into him again. He was still shouting, “What a creature! Oh my children!”

All right, all right! I’d thought I could take my newborn reputation into politics and leap into the thick of the fight .... Girardin had cured me of that little dream.

But I trusted neither his opinions nor his advice. I climbed other stairs and came back down with as many jobs as I’d had when I went up. Nowhere was there a place for my assaults.

I let a corner of my flag slip between the lines of my columns for Figaro; I always included a bloody geranium or a red immortelle in my Saturday bouquets, but I kept them hidden under roses and carnations.

I told stories about the countryside or the barracks, I shared memories of the provinces or of summer romances; but, if I spoke of people in rags, I always sprinkled sunlight on their poverty and jingled the happy bells of their costumes.

The Book I’ve written enough to believe I’ve finished my work when I count the pages: The child has stuck out its head, the one who first kicked inside me the day of Murger’s funeral. There he is in front of me. He laughs, he cries, he kicks around in irony and tears. I hope he’ll be able to figure out how to make his way in the world.

But how? The people in the building all say that collections of articles are a drag on the market, that nobody wants that kind of thing anymore.

Still, I put my kid under my arm and we went out to knock on two or three doors. Everywhere we were politely requested to get the hell out.

Finally, though, down there, miles away, a budding editor risked leafing through the first pages.

“You’ve got a deal! You’ll have proofs to correct in two weeks and it’ll be ready for the presses in two months.”

I opened my nostrils and expanded my chest. To say a book is ready for the presses is equivalent to the command “Fire!” in the military, it’s like a rifle aiming through a window.

The book is going to be published, the book has been published.

This time it really seems to me that I’ve made it. I have more than my face above ground, I’m liberated all the way to my waist, all the way to my belly—I don’t think I’ll ever be hungry again.

Don’t be too sure, Vingtras!

But, while you’re waiting, my good fellow, savor your success. Yesterday’s unknown beggar can sit down to vegetables garnished with laurel.

The book’s moving right along, the kid’s really healthy and people are drinking to his health in downtown bars and Latin Quarter garrets. The “unwashed” have recognized one of their own, the Bohemians have seen the pit, I have saved a host of boys who were running toward wasted lives and prison cells along the path Murger had bordered with lilacs.
Lilacs!
I might have landed in that pit myself. It makes me tremble when I think about it—even now that I'm basking in my young fame.

My young fame? I use that expression to puff myself up a little, but in reality I don't think it means too much to me to read the newspapers' account of the birth of a young writer who'll go far.

My emotions were stronger at my lecture; I was more moved when I was granted the right to make a speech to the people. Then I had to inject feelings, drop by drop, into hearts quivering right there before me. I could hear them beat simply by turning my head, I could see my words flaming in eyes that were staring at mine, in gazes caressing or threatening me—it was almost armed battle.

But those dailies on my table there like autumn leaves do not tremble and shout.
Where are the stormy noises I love?

I'm even ashamed of myself when the reviewer discusses and praises only the stylist, when he doesn't uncover the weapon hidden underneath the black lace of my prose, like Achilles' sword at Skyros.
I'm afraid of being considered a coward by those who heard me in bull sessions when I promised that if I ever escaped from the dirt of poverty and the darkness of night I would leap at the enemy's throat.
It is that enemy that's infuriating me today.

In reality I was irritated rather than pleased to be acclaimed by men I scorn.
True pleasure, the pleasure that wrings tears of sincere pride from my eyes, is mine when I read letters sent from I know not where to reach me I know not how. They allow me to shake the hand of unknown, unsuspected men and feel the grip of a frightened novice or a bloody victim.
"If only I had read you sooner!" says the victim.
"If only I hadn't read you!" says the novice.
These letters make me feel that I've penetrated the crowd, that now there are soldiers, an army behind me! ... Ah! I've spent whole nights prowling around my bedroom, holding these bits of paper in my twisted fingers, planning an assault on the world with these correspondents as captains.
Fortunately I saw myself in the mirror. I had assumed a tribune-like pose and rigidified my features into those of a David d'Angers medallion.
None of that, my boy! Hold it!
You're to copy neither the gestures of the Montagnards nor the wrinkled brow of the Jacobins. You are to do the simple work required by battle and poverty.

So be satisfied with telling yourself that it's good to feel affection come to you from strangers after being tortured and misunderstood by those close to you.
Admit the joy you feel in discovering that you have a family that loves you more than your own did, a family that instead of insulting you and laughing at your great hopes, opens its arms to you and salutes you—as on the battlefield the eldest son, the man bearing the honor and the burden of the name, is saluted.
Yes, that's what has taken hold of my soul.
I feel myself appreciated by a few, and I needed that feeling, for it's hard to remain, as I did, cynical and gloomy throughout all of a healthy youth.

Among these letters is a note from a woman.
"And no one loved you when you were so poor?"
No one!
VII  At figaro I ran into a fellow I used to know.

Still another pale mask, but this one has beautiful large clear eyes, a thin mouth, marble teeth, pitted, scarred, pock-marked skin, a goatee on its chin like the point of a spinning top, fuzzy, woolly hair atop its head like a clown's wig—to be worried, twisted, eternally tugged by nervous fingers—all plucked on shoulders as broad as a steamer trunk and screwed into a stiff collar that prevents it from turning.

The head seems to have been added to the neck as an afterthought and fitted like a mask to a spine stiffer than a broomstick.

Take it altogether, a bony, barbed, angular mass you wouldn't want to touch for fear of pricking yourself.

But I have seen a child's soft hands caress that face.

The first time I met him, he was carrying a crying baby in his arms (the mother was sick or had gone away). He was playing mommy and wiping away tears.

My own eyes grew moist.

I helped him amuse the little girl, who, after a while, consoled herself by pulling her father's hair—funny hair whose kinky locks sprang back into place as soon as the cute little fingers had passed through.

At that time Rochefort was writing burlesques in collaboration with some old joker. He's come a long way since then.

He has become an Empire scratcher. He scratches Napoleonic skin with his mind, his courage, his fangs, his nails, his nerve, his goatee, with everything pointed about him. And he does it while giving the impression that scratching is the farthest thing from his mind, while appearing not to touch a thing; ram with a retractable horn, regicide with a clown's nose, republican bee with a red girdle who has slipped into the imperial hive to kill the gold-girdled drones hovering around the green velvet mantle.

Newspaper editors fight for his services. Right now Soleil has just stolen him from Figaro, and Figaro does not know which saint to pray to.

"Vingtras, do you want to take his place?" Villemessant shouts at point-blank range.

Already!

Ah! I shall have my revenge.

They shall regret taking so long to realize my inner strength.

"How much will you give me? . . . Ten thousand francs? Come on! My year's salary has to be as much as I spent during the ten years I was washing my frozen hands in the gutter. . . . Let's say it took eighteen hundred francs—no more!—to get from January first to Saint Sylvester's day. So make it eighteen thousand francs and you've got a deal. Otherwise, nothing doing."

We shook on it.

There is some stingy Auvergnat in me: that evening I boasted too loudly about the sum I had extracted.

But just imagine! That bag of money had been gripped by teeth that had had practically nothing else between them for a quarter of a century.

I might have gone under twenty times over—so many beside me dropped out of sight!

I survived. No thanks to the bourgeoisie. I held them up for ransom today, but I still don't have all that's coming to me. We're not even yet!

And besides, my pride comes less from the inflated price at which I've been assessed than from the fact that the irregulars are being avenged in my person.

I created my style out of bits and pieces apparently picked up by a pointed stick in filthy, heartbreaking places. That style is nevertheless in demand . . . And that's why I flaunt my triumph in the face of those who once slapped my cheeks with their hundred-franc notes and spit on my souz.
Thanks a lot, fellows!
I've been at Figaro less than a week, and they've already had enough.

The paper's regular readers are the indifferent and contented, actresses and society ladies; I really should not be making them laugh so much.

A little Vingras from time to time, by accident, okay, that's amusing, like an adventure at Ramponneau's, like a meal at a farm where you can dunk black bread in white milk, like a well-dressed lady's visit to a worker's house where the soup smells good. But every day! Are you out of your mind?

On the other hand, I am not able, nor do I wish, to be society's jester.

I did not behave treacherously. When the subject first came up, I knew perfectly well I would have all of Paris to fight, and I would have refused that gold if it had not been stipulated that I was to be free to wage the campaign as I chose.

They knew what kind of man they were dealing with.

It seems they did not.

All I can do is pack up and leave; during the dark days I remained myself at the risk of my dignity, at the risk of my life. I did not preserve my integrity in order to compromise it by becoming a chronicler of studios and bedrooms, a word-embroiderer, an eavesdropper at keyholes, a gossip-spinner.

"But if you only would, you have such a brushstroke!" said Vilmessant, who wanted me to stay.

Yes, damn it! I have adjectives for rue Bréda as well as for the Antoine quarter. I know how to pop tubes of color as well as how to tar my canvases and touch up my watercolors.

If I only would... but that's just it, I won't! We both made a mistake. You want a clown, I am a rebel. Rebel I remain, and I'm returning to my post in the ranks of the poor.

For here I am poor once more—once more, still!
We had signed papers of course stipulating that, in the event of a separation, I would nevertheless be paid. And yet I had to fight, not only because of the security granted by pocket money but also because of my will to avoid a defeat. There was a big mess by the time it was over: a compromise, a few thousand-franc notes, the offer of a novel. . . .

I took a stab at that novel. But unquestionably I am not far enough away from my diseased, bruised youth; those pages, even more than my articles, would be considered too full of mute rage, they would bristle with too much anger.

I gained nothing by leaving my hovel—nothing but the hatred of my colleagues, whom my Cassius-like paleness chilled to the bone. Another bit of energy wasted!

But now a little political gossip that may mean something is making the rounds: Olivier's getting restless and Girardin's defending him. A light flashed in the eyeglasses perched on the nose of the pale mask, it raised its gray hand and threatened the Areopagus of statesmen surrounding the emperor.

They killed his newspaper.

Oh, his nails extended, his nerves tensed, he landed on his feet. And the old cat twisted and roared in the bag they tried to drown him in.

His newspaper is dead, but he found a man in trouble who sold him one and lent him a house. He's going to set up business there and listen to all who want to bite.

He remembered my fangs. I got a note from him: "Come." I found him in a blue jacket with a rose in his buttonhole; he came to me with his hand extended and a smile on his lips. "Bulldog, you're about to be unleashed! You'll have a Sunday column. . . . And you'll bark loud enough for people to hear, won't you?"

His lips curled back, he meowed and extended his claws.

I took a bite, and they felt it.
Girardin was ordered to muzzle his dog. He wasted no time sending his manager to tie a stone around my neck and throw me in the river.
Still, it wouldn't have hurt him to wait a while.

For a soldier had accepted the duty of getting rid of me once and for all—a soldier with a plume and three gold braids who, according to what I hear, has already drawn his sword and intends to avenge his general.

That general, Yusof, a barbarian, had just turned in whatever soul he had. I screamed over his body loud enough to wake the dead in the name of the innocent people killed at his command.

His staff delegated their best swordsman to nail my bleeding body to his coffin.

At least that's what they say; that's what Vermorel just told me.

"They'll insult you tomorrow if not tonight. . . ."

"That's good. Don't go, listen to this. If, in the name of their colonel, the red pants come to demand satisfaction from me, they shall have satisfaction. I'll give them all they want. You know about my duel with Poupart? It was agreed that we would shoot until our guns were empty, barrels against chests, firing at will. Now Poupart was my comrade and those pigs are my enemies; we've got to go farther with them. There will be only one ball, just one. The baby-doll breakers won't have to do much shooting! We'll stand in that courtyard over there if they like, or if they prefer we can go where I got Poupart. But two hours after they come, with no discussion, no formal arrangements! Will you be my second?"

"That's some proposition!"

"Come on, you'll do it. My dear fellow, we're going to empty a bottle I've been hiding in the firewood and toast the great opportunity offered an insubordinate civilian: the chance to aim a gun at a regimental commander."

It was a warm, humid evening, my lodgings were far from the city's noise . . . dusk and silence.

Two or three times we heard boots on the pavement. I hoped they had come; I wanted to get it over with.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Vermorel said around midnight. "It may be that the boat left Algeria too late. They might come in the morning."

Nobody came. Nobody yesterday, nobody today.

It makes you so mad you could die. You stock up all your courage, prepare yourself for either a glorious end or a victory that would be the foundation experience of your life—and you get nothing but the anguish of waiting and the humiliation of the suicide imposed by Girardin!

The officer was not so stupid as I had supposed. Maybe he never even thought of sharpening his saber, since he could see that my tongue was already cut out. I was already dead as a journalist.

The notice placed at the head of Girardin's rag calls me dangerous. I could go all over Paris without finding anyone who would take the man who goes into a place one day and gets it struck by lightning the next.

I've really done it this time: rejected everywhere!

I feel less free than when I was dragging rags around dark places. I used to have the independence of the man locked in a forgotten dungeon who can dig a hole in the rock and leap out to strangle his guard.

That was my strength—now they've discovered the drill, I'm a marked man. And, like the number-one enemy of prison guards, I shall be avoided by those who are afraid of the club as well as by those who wield it.

It would have been a different story if I had laid the colonel out dead.

"But my dear fellow, the seconds would not have allowed it, you would have been taken for a coward again."

That's very possible.

I live in a world of skeptics and easy riders. The former would not have believed in my tragic desire, the others would have been shocked to see death brought into a journalistic duel and would have vilified me to prevent my planting a bleeding gun on a Parisian boulevard.
Fortunately I am strong, and if my conditions had not been accepted I would have knocked the challenger's wig askew and pulled his mustaches until a crowd had gathered.

I would have shouted to the loiterers and policemen: "He wanted to stick me like a pig, he knows how to fence. I suggested a duel at point-blank range instead and he showed yellow. Let me beat him up hard!"

I might have been murdered, by accident, or my ribs or back might have been broken on the sly while I was being taken to headquarters or after I was in my cell, during a fight among the prisoners. A counterfeit drunk would have started a quarrel, and the jailer's stick, supposedly being used to separate us, would have smashed into my chest.

None of those things happened.

Fortunately I told no one about the rumor that had reached me. If I had breathed a word about it, my friends would undoubtedly have maintained that I invented the colonel in order to invent the duel to the death.

What crap!

VIII VILLEMESSANT IS STILL shouting in the streets: "Vingtrás? Oh my children, what a creature!"

Funny fellow!

He's a Girardin with big round eyes, jejune jowls, an old sergeant-major's mustache and the bay window and manners of a slave trader. But he's in love with his trade and scatters gold to his "prostituted pigs."

His ferocious wit is capable of slaughtering an editor who fouled up something for him, but two minutes later you see him "peeing from his eyes," as he likes to say, at the story of a family's agony, a child's illness, an old man's misfortune; emptying his change pocket or his folding-money pocket into the apron of a weeping widow with a gesture as jaunty as a prelate

The one with which he stomped on the pride of a novice or of someone he'd been paying for years. He sits on all humanity's niceties but—the animal—he keeps his heart under his butt!

He needs an audience for his tirades. If somebody on his payroll doesn't do the job, he gets a group together and kicks the offender out in front of them all, makes him walk down the steps under the eyes of the entire regiment. He requires subjects who, at a sign from him, leap into the air and dislocate their joints jumping to the overhead light, cracking the ceiling or the beam...

I do not resent that brutality greased with farcical twists.

"Hey, down there, undertaker, tell me something. Did you really take your parents to the morgue and the Champ-des-Navets when they came to Paris to see the big city? You did? Son of a bitch! And I wanted a joker! You're sure as hell not it, you know, no, you're not the kind of joker I had in mind! Ah, I know what it would take to tickle you, sir... a nice little revolution! If it was just up to me... but what would 'My Lord' say? Tell me, yes or no, don't beat around the bush, will Big Daddy be shot by Saint Guillotine's day?"

Of course not. After all, he opened a circus for a whole generation gnawing its fists in the darkness; on the soil where the Empire had sown the Biblical curse of salt, he threw handfuls of Gallic salt—that salt that rejuvenates the earth, sterilizes wounds and sticks the purple into cuts. Paris has that ball of fat to thank for regaining its happiness and irony. Legitimist, royalist? What are you talking about? He's a jester of the old school, and the broadsides his newspaper fires at the Tuileries make him the first insurrectionist of the Empire.

Girardin too.

Liberté's mummy is like Figaro's butterball. If you break the ice keeping the mask cold, you find kindness huddled on pouting lips and tears frozen in cold eyes.

The pale old man doesn't have time to be sentimental or
explain his scorn for humanity and why he has the right to flog like serfs the dirty cowards who let themselves be flogged. He does not insult those he respects, no danger of that!
He stabbed my farrago of illusions and ripped it to shreds, but he made certain the knife hit me right in the chest.

"It's because I could tell you were brave," he told me the other day when, in the middle of a party, he took my arm in full view of the guests and walked with me for a long time.
He stopped suddenly, stared at me and said, "You think I despise poor people, don't you? You're wrong. But I think it's idiotic for a strong-minded man to play the Samaritan before getting enough gold to guarantee his own freedom. You have to have it! And besides," he added, in a lower voice, "you can do good deeds—in secret, you know. Otherwise the hungry masses would gobble up all you own."

There is reason to believe that the old cynic is indeed charitable.
I have even learned that the man struck down by his bullet can rest in peace in the Saint-Mandé cemetery; since the burial the dead man's widow has been living on bread given by the dueler's bloody hand, the son has an unknown guardian for life—the man who killed his father!
Shakespearean in their fashion, those two great journalists of our age: one carries around Falstaff's belly, the other offers Yorick's head to the meditations of Hamlets.

"Get a place of your own, my friend, you need your own paper," fat Villennessant bellows incessantly in my ear.
That's easily said; but I intend to give it a try anyway.
I devoted six months to the attempt—six months during which I spent all my time drinking ruinous concoctions in luxurious establishments where I stood watch for two hours, examining the sleek rich men the way I'd done during my younger days, hoping to find the seven sous to buy Irish coffee—which I drank but couldn't pay for and had to beg the server to let me have on credit.

So much petty hesitation, so much comic shame!
I laughed at the puns of eldest sons dumber than geese; I screwed up my mouth like a hen's ass when they came out with a "really good one" because they were able to put two thousand francs into the affair if they chose. I bought a round for knights of industry who promised me an heir or a money lender—and who didn't give a single damn about what happened to me!
It was smart of me to be born an Auverpin. Any other man would have grown tired and begged the enemy for mercy. I myself yielded not a foot—it was my feet which yielded.

My shoes wore out. I used up the remains of the Figaro money while I was "at liberty." I even have debts. Now I am down to my last hundred-franc note.
I'm spending it very carefully. I eat bread and drink water at home so I can suck on a cutlet and have a cup of tea in a restaurant catering to capitalists.

I finally got my hooks into a furry collar and slammed my door on the coat-tails of a Jew.
I've got him!
His name will have top billing, he'll get the title of Director and half the profits, and will in return pour two thousand francs into the project.
You can go far with two thousand francs.
But, far or not, I'm ready to get it over with.
"You're an administrative genius, you say? Well, there're a few things I can do too! Let's get the posters up."

Fifty francs got some pasted on walls.
Rase as they are, poor things, one of them caught the eye of a newspaper publisher who maintains that he would have welcomed me with open arms if I had only gone to him. He's lying.
"What about leaving that chick—it'll die of overexertion before cracking its egg—and joining me?"
"No!"
I feel like laughing a little in the face of this society that I cannot attack head-on even if I risk my life!

Irony is crackling in my brain and heart.

I know the struggle is useless, I admit in advance that I'm licked, but I'm going to play jokes on myself, play jokes on others, and scream out my contempt for the living and the dead.

And I did it! I indulged myself in a lump of frankness, a real slice of contempt.

I gathered around me the first people who showed up.

A sixteen-year-old boy came to me; he had morbid features and moved like a girl, but he also had the facial structure of a kid with ideas and guts. A kind of plaster cast, grown yellow from exposure, in which the rat of consumption was setting up house. Ranc sent him to me.

He roamed around in front of the house for two hours before getting up the nerve to come in; it was his mother who finally opened the door and requested the boon of a literary auscultation for her son, Gustave Maroteau.

After him came Georges Cavalié, the Don Quixote of ugliness—lanky, wiry, ungainly, put together wrong; I had baptised him Pipe-en-bois two years earlier in the café Voltaire because of his resemblance to a peace pipe with an ash stem carved by a shepherd. Under this name he had come to incarnate the balcony's hisses after the Henriette Maréchal riot at the Théâtre Français. Dried fruit of the military school, but not at all dumb, weird, cheerful, courageous as well, he lacks a chest but has plenty of heart.

Another, red-faced, stocky, topped by a bald skull sprinkled with so many blue spots it looks like a roast chicken garnished with truffles, a country air about him, pierced ears, the mouth of a wine taster under his nose. He landed at my house, said he was recommended by the Goncourt brothers and took me to see them.

He was also sponsored by Lepère, a lawyer from his province, a deputy tomorrow, a poet yesterday, author of the "Song of the Old Latin Quarter," who has known the boy with the truffled skull for ten years and loves him dearly. "You can count on him," he declared, striking the man's shoulder. "Dull but steady."

And Gustave Puissant became the paper's source of amusement, a real Roger Bontemps. He furnishes articles that grip the reader by virtue of being studied and reworked, he spies on the government, rats on its heroes and delivers stirring briefs.

I have a Normalien who likes to pee on the Ecole Normale.

And they're all able to infuse new life into old truths and use paradoxes to light fires under the marble cops standing guard in the museums—the joke always has a serious target, it moves forward, ever forward, until it penetrates the Tuileries and tweaks Badinguet's nose.

But you have to be cautious about babbling politics even in jest. And every month our poor Rue is confiscated, its sale is forbidden, we're made to suffer a thousand tortures.

One fine day I wrote a brutal piece, The Prostituted Pigs, which, while apparently chastising cattle dealers, castigated magistrates and ministers, law, order and tradition.

The agent came.

We're going to be executed.

But my name is not on the title, the law is directed only against the manager and, provided the rifle is smashed, has no desire to punish the man who took aim and fired.

Poor manager! He was sent to me by I know not whom and made me remember him with two words, two words that opened one of the wounds I had kept hidden since childhood in the bloodiest part of my heart.

One day, when I was ten years old and Father was a proc, after he had succeeded in getting permission for his son to
work at his side in the Upper Form dormitory, a student irritated M. Vingtras, who raised his hands and grazed the insolent pupil's cheek.

That schoolboy's brother, stocky, strong, already bearded, preparing to be a forest ranger, leaped over the table, hit the schoolmaster, knocked him down and beat him up.

I wanted to kill the big lout! I had heard the bursar mention a pistol he kept in his chest of drawers. I sneaked into his room like a thief, went through the drawers, found nothing. If I'd laid my hands on the weapon I might have found myself in the dock.

The headmaster was upset and apologies were made before the whole school. My father wept.

When, roused by chance, my memory reconstructed that scene, I beat it, stuffed it with other thoughts, dragged it to other ground, for I had the feeling that mud was bubbling inside my skull.

And here was the younger brother of the boy who had insulted my father, offering his cheeks to the slap of Justice.

For a while I felt like avenging myself on the innocent. If his hair had not been gray I would have returned the blow with twenty-five years of fury behind it and laid him out on the floor.

But the managerial candidate looked like a nice guy. Besides, he was willing to work for almost nothing. And, because the brother of the slapper was offering himself at a reduced price, the son of the slappee forgot the insult and signed him up. For a million francs I wouldn't have accepted the pain the scandal caused me. In order to save twenty francs I shook hands with the cause of my father's scandal, and we were in business.

Now it was his turn to sob, even though it wasn't humiliation but something approaching an honor that was awaiting him. He was to be condemned for political reasons, and those who had not seen him snivel and whine before his judges would have been surprised to see him overcome by emotion.

The newspaper's attorney used his client's weakness in an attempt to evoke pity and asked clemency for the poor man, who nevertheless got six months. He walked out mopping his bald skull, oblivious to the drops already falling from the checkered handkerchief he had soaked with his tears.

"Try to keep me out of prison," he asked between sobs. The lawyer promised to see what he could do.

"Six months! Six months!"

He made his handkerchief pee... and Laurier laughing behind his back.

Laurier would laugh even if the distress were real. Don't think for a minute that he's cruel, it's just that his veins transport contempt for humanity all over his body, and this contempt twists and puckers his thin mouth: the snout of a rodent, the face of a rat—a rat somebody has grabbed by the tail and dipped into a vat of Malvoise. His complexion is claret, he's sanguine!

There's vigor under that frail covering, and his small, woodgnawing teeth release a shrill, firm voice that twists its way into the court's ears like a gimlet.

He's gay and biting, even bold. There are grains of gunpowder as well as grains of salt on his tongue; he makes you laugh and he makes you afraid, his irony can amuse as well as rip, he can prick you or cut off one of your limbs as he chooses—and passion never influences his choice.

He is skepticism incarnate. He shoots for the joy of shooting and hitting, his sword runs red and his convictions run white.

This little, chinless, lipless man with a head like a weasel looks like a dunce but is one of the most awesome men of his time, the Machiavelli of his age—a sly, mocking, thoroughly rakish Machiavelli, for he comes after Tortillard, Jean Hiroux, Calchas and Giboyer.

He's no longer writing the Prince, no sir; now he's writing the Orator.

At the Palace he met a kid from the South with a black mop
and was blind in one eye. His infirmity makes him a being apart, gives him a trademark, a sign by which he can be recognized. If he'd had two eyes, Machiavelli wouldn't have taken him on; a man like everybody else, without a white eye, without a hump or glass eye, wouldn't have been worth the trouble.

As it was, Laurier did not hesitate and offered his hand to the phenomenon. This was the ram he would train to butt in the holes through which he could slip his feverish curiosity and his desires for millions.

He could use his tiny teeth and gnaw his way through the door—he prefers that somebody else smash it down.

He smelled out just the right time.

People were ready for a strong voice, plebeian gestures, the appeal of a street orator, a male Theresa. They were tired of Schneider and Morny, Cochonnette and Caderousse. The bourgeoisie were fed up with the Empire, all those merchants were now brave enough to let someone else challenge the government they had prepared the way for with their cowardice, their massacres of workers and their summary exiles.

The race's pride and self-interest showed it that it was time to give Bonaparte dirty looks. The pupils of Gambetta's eyes, even the one covered with a patch—especially that one—were to radiate the angry gaze and the deathly glow that would make those in power quake in their boots.

Laurier uses him to laugh at France. He loves gross jokes and delights in his role of a Barnum with a sensitive nose able to smell that grossly absurd eloquence is in the wind.

Gambetta's very vulgarity helps keep him in vogue, the banality of his store of ideas is so much fertilizing manure for his talent. Ham to his fingertips, he never takes a minute's vacation. His lion-skin ulster hangs on no hat peg, in no bourgeois drawing room, in no swinging bar, in no shady nightclub—always Dantonesque, even at meals, even in bed.

He once read that Danton, before sneezing his head off, declared that he regretted nothing in life, seeing that he had guzzled with drinkers and boozed it up with girls; and he plays guzzler, boozel, Gargantua and Roquelaure!

He uses his revels and orgies to create a legend that Laurier circulates.

This mixture of drunken libertinage and antique fluency dazzles the devout conservatives who perpetuate the tradition of Molé and the misfits in the café Madrid; they walk among the crowd shouting, "Huh? What did I tell you? Is he ever a man?"

Ham! Ham!

IX

An article in the Rue took the bread out of my mouth. In it I called the Parisian deputies bad jokes and potential assassins.

From now on the opposition newspapers are closed to me. I dared touch idols; the Bonapartists jilted me, the republicans are going to starve me.

Each rung of the parliamentary ladder bears one of the five cocks of the left whose tail feathers I plucked to show their bleeding tails. They swore that they would avenge themselves by making me bleed from stomach and heart.

My literary nightingale will be permitted to chirp no more than my political rage is allowed to roar. I was laughing between my teeth when I began the struggle. Now either those
teeth will have to get used to chewing air or I'll have to let them be pulled, apologize and lick ass.

I really had a great idea when I sat down to write those two hundred lines! Thanks to them I've been chosen for vituperation and death!

"But it's also thanks to them that the people know who you are," an old insurrectionist told me with a hand on my wrist and a gleam in his eye. "Hold your ground, Goddamn it! And when the revolution comes, the city will call your name while it's nailing them to the wall. Remember what I say, citizen."

Hold my ground! Oh, if only I had a loaf of bread, a white shirt, a garret, a safe-conduct pass good in some restaurant—an income of a hundred sous a day!

I have none of those things.

I must earn my living mess ing around books again, compiling yellowed papers and laying duck eggs for dictionary makers who, for the reasonable price of ten centimes a line, will buy the right to humiliate me as they choose, make me cool my heels in the waiting room, shake their heads like pawnbrokers devaluing the merchandise offered them... a tic they're especially plagued by when the man they're exploiting is a formerly successful bankrupt.

Hell! I'd rather break rocks under the hot sun!

"I'm listening!" shouted Landriot, who dropped out of the Ecole Normale to be the secretary of one of the Sorbonne's bigwigs and quickly saw his patron kick the bucket and leave him in the lurch.

He became Gustave Planche's right-hand man. Old Planche wasted no time kicking off too!

And Landriot has been spitting red for years. He was coughing and his voice was gravelly when he slashed out at my ambitions with the wheezy laugh that reminds you of a dying street urchin.

He's tried everything at one time or another—even begging.

He doesn't hide it, he spits out his confession and the shreds of his lungs at the same time, spits them at this society that allowed hunger to eat away his chest—and his honor.

He's why I'm considered an s.o.b. by those content to pity him and laugh at the descriptive little play he's built around the begging scene.

"I couldn't have done it," I screamed. "I'd have stopped the man and told him, 'Either you give me something to buy bread with or I choke you to death!'"

They hid their faces. "He really might do it!"

Yes, I would have attacked in the park before I begged in the streets; but I would also have cracked my skull against a wall or thrown myself into the river before I compromised my integrity, which is a tool I have to keep pure and sharp as a new blade.

Landriot cackled. "Your integrity? I'll kill you just like my consumption will kill me. If they don't get you first—they might have to, you're stronger than I am... But if you think dictionary work will let you eat your fill, if you think you'll get wine every day and a bed every night on the good ship Lachâtre or Larousse, you've got another think coming, my son! Less than you used to get, I tell you. Those pseudoliberal sticks as close together as toes, and you stomped their boots with your wooden shoes. Quarantine him, stick him in the lazaretto... Your best bet would be to start coughing blood like me. Then they may be charitable enough to let you work on words related to your disease. They'll even give you a raise the day before you die, since all you'll have to do is stick your bloody handkerchief on a blank page and you'll have a great description of a lung disease—that's how that old fox Appelles painted rage... Look, when you don't believe in God or the devil, you ought to become a priest! At least they get wafers to eat. You, you dunce, you're the wafer that people eat!"
Fortunately my credit is good at the restaurant owned by Laveur, the foster-father of a few nasty young men like me and a few handsome old men like Toussenel and Considérant.

"Come on, don't worry about it! You'll pay us the way M. Courbet did at Handlee's—when he felt like it. And don't get upset about the extras. Just promise to remember us when you get to be somebody, okay?"

Simple people all seem to believe that I'll be "somebody" one day, but the more sophisticated shrug their shoulders when they hear my name.

"Why in hell do you waste time on politics? You've got good stuff in you, you'd have a great future if you did nothing but literature. The way you're going now, all you have to look forward to is poverty and prison.... You're out of your mind!"

"Now the way I do it is to trim the tails first," said an exclusive tailor, with a significant expression on his face, who had been dressing me for a long time and to whom I gave money... when I had too much. "What are you thinking about? You could be a deputy and you decide to insult the Five Republicans of the Chamber! I don't work for those who're going to erect barricades, I don't cut coats to be rubbed against dirty overalls!"

At the moment I needed a new spring "outfit."

Luckily a Jew who dresses the fellows—on the installment plan—was more than willing to take my measurements and offer me all his wares. But he needed to get rid of a backlog of denim so I had to take a carpenter's suit.

I hesitated, I sighed. The Jew appealed to my convictions. He came near to calling me a renegade.

"And you say you are vor ze workers! You ought do be proud do be dressed like zem. Do not be ungratevul, young man. Who knows what zey vill do vor you!"

Him too.

Whom should I believe? The insurrectionist, the landlord, or this Shylock at so much a month?

Whom should I believe?

I should believe none of them. Well-known though I am, I should resume the struggles of my former poverty.

But this time, if there's a call to arms and I appear, they will recognize me. If I'm dressed like a worker they will salute my poverty.

But I must be able to wait until the moment when I can die well—and it's hard to wear a workshop outfit after strolling for a moment on the road to fame and fortune.

But I made my decision.

Why couldn't I lower my flag a notch? Why did I have to defend the poor?

But where would the credit be—if I lived on them, like their vermin?

X Sainte-Pélagie Prison  My friends had a little celebration last night before taking me to Pélagio.

I've written two articles for others since the Rue died. Two blasts that earned me a prison term.

I went in with a hangover. They thought I was sick and rushed in the pharmacist.

That made me angry. A rebel needing an apothecary!

"But my friend, everyone here is drugged," maintained the Diaforius. "For the present, I hold the keys to the kingdom."

He's a happy sort. He gave me details. "The personnel of the political section is divided into two camps: those who are all right and those who are not... you understand! '89's all right, '93's out of it, '830's half and half. There's an old disciple of Pierre Leroux—hell, that's all you need to know!"

That old pharmacist hit it right. He knew where to put his fingers!
"Yes, '93's out of it."

Every morning I see a man walk by carrying a chalice, a white urn, under a linen cover. It looks like he's on his way to say a low mass. But he only cracks open a concealed door that closes behind him, hermetically.

When he comes back out he goes so fast I can't make out his movements, and it's all I can do to catch a glimpse of the receptacle under the napkin. I do not see the usual bulge and the familiar belly.

I finally lifted the veils.

The mysterious urn is a vase for personal uses that has disguised itself to fool people, a chamber pot, a slop jar trying to look like an amphora; but part of it is visible... as a green tube that chokes my last doubt. Besides, the man unburdened himself, told me all, showed me all.

"I give myself one every day. I've been giving myself one a day for thirty years, and you can see how healthy I am."

"Right. Only, why not have the monstrosity emptied by the altar boy?"

He drew himself up to his full height and stared angrily at me: "Citizen, in the Republic I desire, each man empties his own pot. Drudgery as well as duty!"

"But you have an officer's cup, a first-class, A-number-one font. You're betraying your principles."

"No! I'm collectivist as regards content but individualist as regards form. Everyone carries a soldier's pack, but he can decide for himself whether it's oval or square."

"Will the use of the enema tube be obligatory?"

"Don't make jokes, young fellow. You're talking to a veteran. You're too new, you're not ripe enough to have earned the right to assess my actions."

"I assure you I have no wish whatsoever to assess!"

"Too new? Not ripe enough?... Right, not yet ripe for the water pipe! And not yet crazy about the syringe nozzle, old man!"

Wouldn't he like for me to have one too and do my duty in the morning, on command—at an order from the Committee of Public Safety. Gentlemen, to your weapons!

"I'm pure," he always says.

Well, who wouldn't be pure after being pumped out so many times!

"I take my stand on principle."

"He at least does something besides stand once a day."

"Our fathers, those giants..."

"My father was of medium height or, to be frank, short; my grandfather was called Waist-High in his village. I have no giants for ancestors."

"The immortal convention."

"A pile of backward Catholics!"

"Don't blaspheme!"

"And why not? Don't I have the right to roll a ball down the bowling alley of your gods? I thought you were for freedom of thought, and of speech, and of sacrilege— if I feel like it. Are you going to stick a red-hot iron through my tongue, or inflict the water torture on me, via the mouth, with that little tool of yours... until I beg for mercy? Oh no! Not on your life!"

Peyrat replies with a bitter smile and rams a Balaklava down on his ears, the kind of helmet they use to scale Mont Blanc; he's actually from the Aventine hill, he really is. He's a Gracchus. That man with the bedpan, syringe and stringed cap is a Gracchus.

The disciple of Pierre Leroux laughs to his heart's content. I heard a legend concerning him.

Cantagrel was, in a lost region of France, a member of the Circulus Society. For the god of all, every member was to furnish part of the manure—no matter what the cost. Humanitarianism did him in; he wanted to show his zeal, so he took herbs that burned out his insides and he had to return to Paris to try and put on the brakes.
"If it had only done some good!" he occasionally muses, sadly.

It seems he once wrote to Hugo about the chapter on Cambronne in *Les Misérables*. Hugo replied:

"Brother, the Ideal is double: ideal-thought, ideal-matter; soul flying to the summit, excrement falling to the pit; bird songs above, gas rumbles below—sublimity everywhere! Your fecundity is equal to mine. Brother, it is enough... Stand!"

"I signed Hugo's name and played the joke," a comrade told me.

They're all amusing.

This Circulutine was sent up for being the manager of an inflammatory sheet. I suspected as much.

The other was the editor-in-chief of the only republican newspaper to find favor in the eyes of the Emperor and be granted the right to live. Not that the man is a bootlicker who showed yellow—on the contrary, he's tough and unbending, but in the Jacobin manner. And Napoleon is well aware that Robespierre is Bonaparte's older brother and that whoever defends the Republic in the name of authority is a man after the Empire's heart.

Fortunately I can isolate myself.

*In the Tiny Tomb*  I live in the Tiny Tomb.

It's a narrow, sad cell high in the prison; but by crawling on the table you can reach a window and see the tops of trees and a large patch of sky.

I spend many hours with my head against the bars, sucking in the coolness of the wind or letting my forehead bask in my part of the sun.

This solitude does not frighten me. Often I even sluff off '89 and '93 to be face-to-face with myself so I can follow my thought, huddled in a corner of the cell or bathing in the free air beyond, beyond the barred window.

I do not consider this captivity slavery; it is freedom.

In this atmosphere of calm and isolation, I belong entirely to myself.

*The Club* That calm was disturbed because there were vacancies to be filled; I was called to the chamber of honor, which was invaded, and which I willingly allowed to be invaded. My lodgings became the prison's drawing room, dining room, weapons room and club.

They kick up quite a row in here.

But the noisiest knight of all, beyond a doubt, is Proudhon's former collaborator, old Langlois.

"Goddamn it! Goddamn it all to hell!"

"Oh, it's you. What's the weather like outside?"

"The weather?" He strikes the furniture, rolls fierce eyes and, with an angry kick of his boot, gets rid of a couple of slippers minding their own business near the bed. "The weather... It's very nice."

He admits this in a furious, threatening voice. His hand seems to be searching for a sword. He looks like he's ripping off a cartridge when he blows his nose, and you'd think he was taking a message to the general when he leaves with old newspapers in his clenched fists—sometimes returning abruptly, his face contracted.

"What's up?"

"Somebody."

After he's been there ten minutes, the uproar becomes unbearable. People climb on chairs; he himself clambers onto the night table.

A pantomime, hysterical screams.

We're all dog turds!

What! you say that I, Jacques Vingtras, would hesitate to hang the Director of the Bank!
"There's talk of hanging him?"
"Yeah! Yeah! And you're holding back, Goddamn it!"

Today he feels like erecting a gallows for the people with cash reserves who live on nothing but their pocketbooks—the dirty bastards!

He acts out the execution.
He takes his handkerchief, hangs himself a little, gasps when the time comes, almost swallows his tongue, decides to get back down... and attacks the shoes once again with the rage of a teething puppy.

"But that man's a ravin' lunatic!" says Courbet, smoking in a corner. "He's tawkin' about Proudhon? Ah'm the only one that knew 'im. Waren't nobody but us two ready in fofty-eight! WhoooooooEEEE! Why're you yellin' lahk that? Gawd Awmalty!"

"I'm not yelling, I'm calmer than you are, Goddamn it! Goddamn it all to hell!"

Comical and overpowering, these frenzied visitors, these prisoners who are or are not all right... but they've been to school, they're educated men, bourgeois!

Sometimes a worker makes them ashamed of their stupidity and dams up their verbal diarrhea. Better than they, the man who works with his hands.

This revolutionary worker, Tolain, earned a reputation in public meetings. He is the moral leader of the working class.

A narrow face—which looks even longer and thinner than it is because of the long, close-clipped beard hiding his cheeks—piercing eyes and narrow lips, a handsome forehead.

He lisp a little too, like Vermorel. Awesome, ambitious men, those who are or who seem to be chewing the pebbles of Demosthenes. Their juvenile babblings cover the energy of men of action and allow them to ambush their enemies.

A distinguished man behind his worker's clothes.
I once saw a celebrity who looked like him: the pale preacher of the June Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, the man who, with saintly gestures and honeyed lips, ordered the great slaughter—Falloux.

Maybe their noses are a little different; but I consider them mirror images because their features stand alike before me, because that aristocrat and this commoner have the same fragile elegance, the same sweet voice, the same burning gaze.

He has the slightly swinging gait of a plebeian; but he might be trying to walk that way. If he chose, he could display the supple stride of a gentleman. His discreet laughter, his piercing eyes, his sharp profile and his beard, which he keeps well-trimmed, make me feel he thinks of nothing but breaking through the lower-class atmosphere and dark air in which he lives. He is patiently carving the tool of his ambition, this ex-woodcarver who abandoned the real tools of his trade long ago.

"There's a movement to raise money to have them sharpened, they're so rusty he couldn't use them even if he wanted to," said a joking worker.

But if he's afraid of work that dirties his hands, he is not afraid of lonely study, of long nights spent in conversation with the Fathers of the Economic Church and the Fathers of Social Revolution. He bought Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say from a second-hand book dealer who got them from some bourgeois failure, some classless man fallen into the gutter. They are now on the desk of the rising artisan.

Those added to four or five volumes of Proudhon gave him all he needed. He has the touchstone of all financial and ideological legal tender; he shall become learned—he is. This is the foreman of the shop where the workers' revolution is being put together.

He earns his living working for an ironmonger. His boss is very proud to have such a smart guy as an employee.

The emancipated plebeian already has his own clique. There's Perrachon, a plodder organizing an efficient, disci-
plined army, who, in contrast to his leader, has not abandoned the workbench and represents manual labor in this house of opinions. He worships as a god the man who has made himself a book-reader and an authority on magic spells. He imitates and apes him, cuts his beard and hair in a similar fashion, buttons his coat the same way, arranges his hat so it sits on his forehead and ear as the other's does.

This is, I imagine, still another master stroke of my people's Falloux. Perrachon uses the strings of his work apron to tie people to his intellectual boss, people who otherwise might be leery of the worker's jacket that grew so long it became a frock coat.

Let him never wake up and cut this final bond, let him not abandon overallled men as he has abandoned overalls!

XI I have undertaken a history of the men defeated in June. I've found several, all poor, but almost all dignified in their poverty. Only a few have been spoiled by the easy life of prison and now let their wives bear the burden of working and worrying about providing for the family.

Many of these women were heroic. They raised the kids while their father was at Doullens or in the hulks, deprived themselves of everything so the small citizens would lack nothing, displayed as much genius as courage in digging into the earth to find a trade, a skill, some way of getting bread. And the sprouts grew—budding insurrectionists!

A few girls did disappear at the age when a blue ribbon can be an obsession and poverty makes people ugly. This is the great sorrow of the tenements to which the exile returned to find only the cracked, dirty image of the child he had had photographed for ten sous one Sunday when there was a fair near Paris. It had been a hell of a lot of trouble to get her to keep still; Daddy had had to kiss her ten times and advise her to be good.

She had been.

She hasn't been for a long time now, and nobody knows where she is. She does not dare come visit her mother, she thinks the old man would run to her.

"No!" one of them said to me through her sobs, "I'm afraid he'll cry."

I live in this denimed world and am undoubtedly more moved than I ever was under the eyes of the explicators of the Conciones, in the world of ancient heroes. I soon had my fill of helmets, tunics and cothurni.

And here in the company of my new comrades, in the midst of simple people, I have grown contemptuous of Jacobin hand-me-downs.

All that shit about the legend of '93 affects me just like the faded, filthy tatters offered old Gros, the ragman, in his shop on rue Mouffetard which the wind whirls through all day.

He occasionally does me the honor of inviting me to eat with his family; and I am extremely happy to feel myself, the declassed man, respected and loved by this veteran of back labor who, because citizen Vingtras is coming, adds a little fat to the steaming pot whose good smell rises among the industrial odors released by the Bièvre.

And he tells the little woman, "No need to save up, woman, so long as we get enough soup in our bellies every day."

Then, turning to me, "Life is hard, that's a true thing. But it makes us, the workers, feel better to see educated men like you come over to the proletariat's side. Promise me something: if I ever have to go look for the rifle I buried behind the Gobbelins the night of June 24, you'll come eat behind the barricade the way you come eat here, won't you?"

And the little woman answers with a serious smile, "Yes, Father, I know he will, the gentleman certainly will be beside the poor."

I pointed to a bit of red flannel sticking its tongue through a sack. "We'll put that on the end of a bayonet."

"Oh, young man, we've got to have socialism as well as revolution!" 
publicanism! When that day comes, we'll rip up all the banners and make wadding from them."

Socialism, republicanism—two enemies!
Those old veterans of June '48 told me that, when the men of June 13, '49, joined them in prison, the newcomers were greeted by threatening looks and gestures, that the first day both armies were together they fortified positions against each other. A lot of heads butted hard under the prison hat they shared, despite the fact that everyone's buttonhole held the immortal scarlet for common ceremonies, burials and birthdays.

Hatred remained, implacable, dividing the parties, bursting forth on the slightest pretext. A poorly enclosed bit of garden, a strawberry stem passing over the line of pebbles forming the frontier, a nasturtium stretching up between two cells was all it took for men to accuse one another of all the failures and mistakes of the Revolution.

I learned a lot in the greasy spoon run by a veteran of Doulens, where all my insurrectionist shipwrecks sink together the nights after payday or the mornings no one can find work. Everyone comes to make his deposition, testify to what he saw during the tragic hours, summarize his memories of the fatal battle.

The best speaker of the group is a happy fellow with shining, sharp, steel-gray eyes whose cheeks are as red as if he wore rouge, whose forehead covers too vast an expanse and makes him resemble some ham actors who shave off the front part of their hair in order to make their brows more noble. His long hair falls in locks like those of a mountebank—or a poet.

All he lacks is the brass ring enclosing the acrobat's crowning glory, or the paper crown of Toulouse's Jeux Floraux.

No one would ever guess that he's an ex-cabinetmaker sentenced to life imprisonment because, with his apron around his belly, he gave the finishing touches to a huge cabinet of paving stones built on the corner of two streets.

Just now it's hard to get work, so he has become a salesman/broker, and, if you believe what he says, he's almost making enough to live on. His blue frock coat is clean; however, he still wears his worker's cap.

"It saves wear on my hat when I'm not going to visit clients," he says. "And besides, comrades, I'm still a worker: a traveling worker instead of a stationary worker, that's the only difference."

"And Ruault, what's he doing now? Have you seen him recently?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Well, as a matter of fact ... haven't you heard? They say he's ratting for the cops."

"Let's talk about something else, okay?" old Mabille said. "Everybody's ratting if you believe what you hear. All we have to do is slit the throats of the ones we're sure of ... that'll discourage the others."

Old Mabille is a former engraver who lost his skill in the cruel idleness of incarceration and became a street peddler.

But, while he was in prison, he borrowed books from his fellow inmates and studied. He reflected, discussed, concluded.

His broad, wrinkled, bare forehead tells you about his meditations; this seller of fans or lampshades—depending on the season—has the face of a philosopher of combat. If he had a black coat on his back, people would stop before this tall old man and bow to his grave features.

"What does he teach?" people would ask from the Sorbonne or the Ecole Normale.

What does he teach? His specialty changes with life; his lectern is the table on which he leans his elbows in a lower-class bar to preach revolt to the young, or a barrel removed from the barricade and stood on its end so he can climb up and harangue the insurrectionists.
A good many of those I see in ragged clothes, several of these starving slobs have read Proudhon and mulled over Louis Blanc.

A terrible thing! At the end of their calculations, at the conclusion of their theories, the sentinel of an uprising always stands erect.

"You know we have to have more blood!"

And why?

Why do these men who live on nothing and need so little, why do these old saints with long beards and gentle eyes who love little children and large ideas imitate the prophets of Israel, why do they believe in the necessity of sacrifice and the fated certainty of the hecatomb?

An eight-year-old girl cut her finger the other day—a fierce, hairy-chested man fainted. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed the way all these former State prisoners comforted and kissed the child. One made her a puppet with his handkerchief, another ran to buy her a cheap doll. He spent his tobacco money, he did not smoke all evening. And they tied a rag around the place where it hurt with more emotion than they would have felt bandaging the wounds of an atrociously mutilated fighter in an improvised street hospital.

The sharp-eyed boy had decided to make a book; he writes. I suspected as much.

"Yes, I wrote down what I saw at Toulon. I’ve got two notebooks that big. Come over to my place and I’ll show you."

We made an appointment. "You’ll meet my wife, she’s the daughter of Pornin, ‘Pegleg.’"

A frail, slim creature, gracious and sad—so sad you want to die! Dignity, a nameless melancholy coming from you know not where, perhaps reflecting an incurable, hidden ill. The hair is gray, the shade of gray that betrays the molting of sorrow; one evening some painful revelation must have thrown ashes on that young head, faded that tender face, scratched it with those wrinkles fine as silk threads.

She barely replied to her husband’s banal hello, and greeted me almost sorrowfully.

I spoke to her of her father, that famous “Pegleg” who has his moment of glory in the intimate history of the events of February.

"Yes, I’m Pornin’s daughter. My father was a good man!"

She repeated “a good man!” several times, her eyes lowered, clasping her small arms to her breast, moving her chair in order that, or so it seemed to me, the other man would not touch her as he walked around the room in search of his manuscript.

Finally he slapped his forehead and said, “I remember now! It’s downstairs.”

He went down as if afraid of being seen, curving his back, dragging his feet awkwardly although his shining eyes easily pierced the shadows spread in the apartment by the gathering dusk.

The shutters were still closed; she had not raised the latch when we came in. It was as if she wanted no one to see the color of her words.

When we were alone, she spoke only one sentence.

“Are you in a conspiracy with my husband?”

“I’m not a conspirator.”

She made no reply, and we sat mute in the darkness.

He returned with his notebooks. “It’s not polished the way a professional writer would do it, but there’re a lot of memories in it. Use it in your work. Just print my name so people can see that the June men they sent to prison were neither as ignorant nor as evil as they all said.”

Her eyes opened wide and flashed a cold light at the man, a light so cold it froze me on the way. He saw me to the door,
muffling his steps and voice as if in a house where no one can speak because someone is dying—or has already died.

I went back to Paris through discreet, dark streets, my brain filled with confused ideas, wondering what drama those two beings were playing out.

“Oh, so you went there,” said the old Doullens escapee. “Was his wife home? She’s a brave woman! I saw her at work when she was young—sharp as a tack and happy as a lark. He doesn’t deserve her.”

“Yeah, right. But don’t people say the same thing about him they say about Ruault—that he’s working for the cops?”

“Not a chance! Puny as she is, she’d grab his mustache, slap him around and drag him to us. And she’d give him to Mabille so he could slit his throat. Right, Mabille?”

“Yeah. Unless she’s too ashamed . . . or in love with him. It’s been seen before.”

Someone came in. “Who’re you talking about?”

“Largillière.”

XII

Some men came and, in the name of the revolutionary ideal, called on me to run against Jules Simon for the Chamber of Deputies. I did not refuse. Sheer madness!

Oh, those who believe I accepted out of pride and a desire to make myself known have no idea how I turned pale and trembled and shook when I realized that I was beginning the struggle!

But I could not hold back after being called.

And what would I say to the Antoine area? To the Charonne people, to the Puteaux workers, how should I speak? I was about to throw out barely ripened theories that I had not had time to heft in my insubordinate hands, and once they were out anyone who chose had the right to assess them.

I never had enough money to buy Proudhon’s works. I had to borrow odd volumes and read them at night. Fortunately there was the library, and from time to time I poked my nose and plunged my heart into the spring. But there were other things to do on rue Richelieu beside study social justice, so I was forced to drink on the run and often got choked.

I had to rip open the belly of books and extract the seed of the entries keeping me alive, entries the dictionary boss refused when they smelled of bellicose or plebeian philosophy. He sometimes detected a bad odor after I’d had a swallow of Proudhon—bright red drops had trickled onto the paper from my mouth.

So all I knew was half of what I needed to know, if that! And I was ripe for a grotesque fall, an ignorant man willing to take on the old world in hand-to-hand combat, an apprentice about to rise against a master, a conscript daring to attack a regiment!

It was enough to make you give up and let yourself be rolled down several flights of stairs . . . like pregnant girls trying to keep their lapse a secret.

I was tempted to follow their example and risk crippling or disfiguring myself, for my injuries would be much more serious if I earned the people’s jeers. To be wounded is nothing, but to be hooted would be the ruin of an entire youth crammed with sorrow yet crammed with hope as well.

The first meeting is tonight.

I’m trying to get my tirade into shape . . . Oh yeah, baby! I need hours and hours! I have to content myself with drawing two or three large lines to serve as guide ropes for the entire campaign, I barely have time to sow a few ideas here and there like Tom Thumb’s pebbles. I shall follow those ropes and pick up those pebbles as I approach the ogre.
I need at the very least an escort of devoted friends. But Passedouet and the men of June are gone. They left as soon as I had accepted the challenge, left to return to their quarters in search of other Vingtrases.

No one—by some curious accident—lives in the ward where I was told to go and be killed, as Napoleon ordered his lieutenants to take up positions across a bridge and die. And I have just set out, all alone, for the club, on the top section, called the imperial section, of a two-level bus.

On that vehicle I heard people eulogizing the merits of the man I was setting out to fight. "He'll win with his hands tied behind his back. He'll make mincemeat of Lachaud!"

"There's nobody else running against him?"

"Of course not! What republican would be that stupid?"

Foolish man! There next to you was a poor devil who, while slipping the conductor his three sous right after you did, had dropped scraps of paper on which he had inscribed two sentences to open a speech against your favorite; plus four or five "images," grotesquely gaudy and designed to give color to his tirade.

You may be sitting on them—your ass might be on my eloquence.

"Number 105?"
"Right here."
I tumbled in.

My committee was as poor as Job. I found that the meeting had been called in an abandoned stable. It barely held three hundred people.

They were all there.

"Citizens! . . ."

What made me think of the things I told them? I mounted my attack I know not how, I spoke of the smell of horse manure, the bizarre meeting room, the poverty ridiculing us from the beginning. I ripped my words out of the walls oozing dung and hung with yokes that republican discipline wanted to put around our necks—as if we were beasts of burden!

But we would not allow it!

And I neighed, and I bucked, and I found irony and anger as I went along.

A few "Bravos!" fired my guts. When I finished, they mobbed me.

The president, standing:

"Citizens, we shall now vote on whether to consider the candidacy of Jacques Vingtras."

Hands were raised.

"Citizen Jacques Vingtras is chosen as the candidate of the quarter's revolutionary socialist democracy."

An acclamation by those three hundred poor people underlined the solemnly pronounced declaration.

I was scared stiff, for my success proved nothing.

That round of applause had been produced by a very select company of poor fingers; and even so, how many of those who cheered me because I had a powerful voice or so as not to have an "open break" would abandon me the next day to leap on the bandwagon of Simon triumphant?

My victory had been too easy. I had touched them with my finger, my breath had burned their faces, and I was well aware that my tone and gestures were compelling when my audience was sitting close to me.

But when I was before the enemy, in an immense room packed with people . . . ?

Here I am—the room is packed and immense. At least that's how it looks to me. Our adversaries arranged the meeting. I barely had enough time to prepare nothing—nothing! Not the nose of an orator, not the tail of a peroration!

The zealots on my committee had forced me to gee and haw after the ward's influential people. I ran here, there, elsewhere too. I went all over the ward on foot, in a wagon, in a cart.
was sick from the drinks I had downed at popular bars in order to associate with the good people. I never did more than wet my lips, but I was nonetheless nauseated with wine. And when people saw me sourly accept the round they had offered with such good grace, they considered me very cold or very proud.

Few and scattered about were the brothers I visited. I sought them at the end of a field, asked for them in a workshop—I wasted their time, compromised them in the eyes of their bosses, and found, moreover, that we had often been wrong about their sympathies in the first place. When that happened, they eyed me from head to foot and openly displayed their indignation at being considered capable of helping me sow division in the party.

Petty emotions killing the flower of thought in my head! Debilitating walks stomping on my ideas and crushing them!

Fool that I was!
I had imagined that I would be piteously defeated because I had not assembled a bundle of doctrines.
Come on!
A couple of times I thought I saw a chance to place ideas, rigid and clear, before the crowd. . . . They found me a cold speaker. They were hoping for flaming words—and even my supporters pulled my coattails to whisper that all I had to do before this audience was spin out long sentences in a pleasing voice.

But I, who had once held in my hand the whip of popular eloquence, no longer felt like using it to slash the rumps of other men's speeches and see their words die. I was ashamed of useless gestures and empty metaphors—ashamed of the orator's trade!

Damn it, I could! I could call up gripping images that would hold this group enthralled if I felt like it. But I no longer have the courage to feel like it. I lost the virulent romanticism I once had when I lost the ardor of Jacobin faith . . . and these people barely listen when I speak. I do not yet have the solid build of a strong socialist, and I no longer have the fabric of a popular speaker, a people's Danton—I ripped that lace off all by myself! It's not decay, it's conversion; it's not weakness, it's contempt.

Once, at Boulogne, I thought my last day had come.
"You're the one who wants to keep Simon from being elected!"
They surrounded me, pushed me, hit me.
I was alone, all alone.
At first all I could think of to defend myself was the classical formula: "Freedom of speech is being murdered in my person!"
"Okay, it's being murdered. My fist on your snout is murdering it!" shouted a laundryman with a neck like a bull.

The bureau was afraid that in smashing me they might dirty my opponent's apotheosis. Then I showed a little nerve. At least I knew how to answer those arguments. I could get hold of the laundryman whereas, during the entire campaign, slippery Simon, greasy, supple, obsequiously uncouth, had slipped eel-like between my fingers and drowned the serpents hissing in my throat with milk.

It was a great moment. Alone! I had dared come alone! Never had I been so proud of myself as on that day of intense humiliation.

My pride reared up one other time, however, as we were coming out of a meeting in which the Great One and I had spoken to the crowd one after the other: "He ought to know how to make trash listen."

Finally the torture was over, the electoral period had ended! I was free!
Down near Chaville was a farm where I had spent calm, happy hours, watching men thresh wheat and ducks run to a
pond, drinking a small glass of white wine in the shade of a spreading oak, taking a siesta in new-mown grass near apple trees in blossom.

I was thirsty for silence and peace. I went there, forgetting the Parisian vote, rolling in the hay, listening to tree frogs sing among green reeds. And, at night, I went to sleep between linen sheets, unbleached and rough, like those my village cousins tucked themselves into every night.

The village!

Oh, I was made to be a peasant rather than a politician—even if it means hefting the pitchfork with the bumpkins in a year of drought or a winter of famine!

Seven A.M. A man dressed like a wealthy undertaker, wearing a heavy gold chain and gray pants hanging too high above thick shoes, knocked at my door, introduced himself as a fellow believer and asked me to listen to him for a moment.

"If you were willing, with your connections, your talent..."

"Tardy! Tardy!"

Tardy's an old schoolmate, poor, poor, poorer than I am, for whom I rent a furnished room near my lodgings and who earns his keep copying what I write.

I call him to help me. He leaps into the room in his shirt-sleeves.

"Here, look, just look at that! He came to buy me... and the dirty pig thought I would listen to his offer!"

"No, no, my dear sir," stammered the individual, pale as a corpse, trembling on the stairs.

"Faster! I'm about to knock you to kingdom come!"

"No, no, my dear sir," he repeats, almost falling down the stairs.

But how could they have dared? Who sent him?

Let's think. My committee took care of expenses... but

with the help of a man who had said he was contributing to the cause by giving money for posters and throwaways.

I have to go find him and get to the bottom of this.

I warned my comrades. They dragged their feet...

"You're above all that," they said, shrugging their shoulders.

I insisted.

"For God's sake leave us alone!"

But it still makes me tremble, and I'm afraid this little episode contains a threat whose claws I will one day feel in my neck.

... . . . . . . . . . . . .

XIII I was one of ten named by a popular assembly to ask the Paris deputés a question; to serve them a summons might be a better way of putting it.

Millière, Trinquet, Humbert, Cournet were also among the ten.

At whose house should we begin? Which of the representaives should we approach first?

We found Ferry's address—somewhere on rue Saint-Honoré—in the postal directory of the small café where the delegation met.

"Ferry's house!... You live in his ward, Vingtras, you speak to him."

A spacious entry way, imposing stairs. A silent, serious house. I went up the steps as tense as if I were climbing to the scaffold.

"Here it is."

A maid came to answer the bell. "M. Jules Ferry?"

"In there."

My legs quaked. I was whiter than the servant's apron—which is not saying much.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

We looked at one another. None of us had come in his own name; neither were we presenting ourselves in the name of any
recognized committee, any republican association with a permanent headquarters.

"Tell him it's some men from the Sixth District who have something to say."

"From the Sixth? There isn't any Sixth."

We made ourselves understood—with difficulty. The lady was afraid.

"The hell with it! We're here and we're going to stay," declared Trinquet. And he leaned against the wall like a sentry.

The bourgeois appeared with a smoking jacket and a long snout. "Gentlemen?" he said as he looked us over with gloomy, truly gloomy eyes.

His voice was shaking slightly; so were his fingers.

A minute of silence. Forward!

"You are aware, sir, of the letter in which M. de Kératry proposes to respond to the Chamber's decree of prorogation by a mass convocation of deputies before the Palais-Bourbon on the day and at the hour when, according to law, the session was to have begun. A public assembly has decided that Paris' representatives should be required to state categorically their opinion of this idea and has charged us with the duty of requesting their presence at a meeting in which the People can express their will. ... Will you attend?"

His hands were still trembling; despite his resolute build and features, the man appeared disconcerted.

"I'm not saying no. But I must consult my colleagues. I shall do what they do."

"We shall report your words to the proper individuals," I declared in the voice of a revolutionary clerk reading a death sentence during the September massacres.

We bowed and left.

Place de la Madeleine next.

"M. Jules Simon?"

"Come in, gentlemen."

We were in the famous garret. There's not too much you can say about it. It was not a rat's nest, but neither was it a palace hidden under the tin roof.

Paw, feline, endowed with a priest's gestures and the rolling eyes of Saint Theresa having a fit, oil on his tongue and on his skin, his mouth puckered like the rump of a Christmas goose—he recognized me and walked over, extending his chubby, moist fingers. "My dear former opponent ..."

I put my hands behind my back and moved away, leaving to others the duty of sounding out the gentleman.

Like Ferry, he made no reply—he too would be at the meeting if his group so decided.

On the way out my refusal to shake hands was discussed. Millière was angry; he invoked his title of leader, accused me of having been egoistically insulting and declared that he did not intend to let future visits be marred by similar incidents.

He was going to see M. Thiers "but would be respectful," he added, looking at me.

"Be whatever you damn well please! As for me, I maintain my right not to tickle the enemy's palm."

"We're with you," said all the young people.

I did what I felt like doing. No one, not even a veteran, had the right to discipline my handshakes.

But there was no way to refuse your paw to the jolly fat man with mahogany whiskers, a broad belly and a broad laugh, who, even before I'd had a chance to show my fangs, whispered in my ear, "Hey, slasher, how's it going? You ought to be proud of yourself, the way you let us have it in your Rue. You got off some really good ones!"

And he poked me in what belly I had while asking to what he owed the honor of our visit.

"The question is, gentlemen, what do the People want? Have they sent for my head? But one of my weaknesses is
that I like it where it is. You know, it's an old habit I can't break."

Good humor through full lips and a full coat.
This one's fingers did not tremble but beat out a version of 
Mère Godichon on the table, and his head revolved over his 
penguin's body with the feverish starts of a hummingbird.

"Me, go to the demonstration on the 26th?"
"Two of your colleagues have already agreed to be there."
"Who gives a shit?"
"So you will not come?"
"Not on your life! Expose Bibi without anyone knowing what he's getting into? You can't be serious, my little man."
He laughed, and we could not help laughing with him; at least he didn't beat around the bush.

"If Belleville wins, I'll be there in a flash! But as for dragging it along, playing Brutus... no my children, not me! I agree to nothing, promise nothing, not even," clicking his fingernail against his teeth, "that!"

"You all look like fine fellows to me, you're so convinced you're right you'll go get your heads busted. I salute those heads, but I respectfully refuse to get mine in the way of the club!... Oh, Slasher, by the way: the bit you gave me, 'Manuel was a hero, but he was not reelected,' I didn't say it, but I think it. ... Okay, see you later. My word, it looks like all that you guys think about is dying. Myself, I like life, it's to my taste. Hell, that's easy to understand, you're thin and I'm fat! Be careful, watch your step... Say, if you all get yourselves flung into prison, I'll come bring you cigars and Burgundy. And you know, the best quality!"

He leaned over the bannister, brought his five fingers to his mouth and blew us a very loud kiss filled with promises.

The head of a prophet: Pelletan.
He had in fact prophesied; he was a Biblical scholar of the revolution, a bearded missionary for the propagation of the republican faith, with the hair, look and appeal of a conspiratorial Capuchin. He had exorcised the June insurrectionists with Chabot's sprinkler and excommunicated them through the bars of the Tuileries' cellar. This visionary had called them rogues and traitors in good faith.
What would his reply be?
Nothing much... he would confer with his colleagues, too. And he extended his hairy hands over our heads as if to bless us.

"Amen!" Humbert chanted through his nose.
Our trip was over.
And Gambetta?
Gambetta had invented a chest cold he used whenever he risked taking a stand.

I don't like this string, I can feel where it leads. But those who do not care about the people are taking great risks. First they have chest trouble as a joke, then comes the day when their cold is so serious they literally cough their heads off.

Jules Favre tore up the summons without reading it and turned up his fat lip in a scowl of supreme disdain.

Did Millière see Thiers? I don't know. In any case, if he spoke to him he did not push his gray hat down over his ears, that I'm sure of!

Bancel was in the provinces.
Would they come?

Biette Hall, Boulevard Clichy They came.
They walked up the rickety staircase leading to a room with bare walls lit by smoky lamps and furnished with old, ramshackle school benches in place of chairs.

A table and a few wicker chairs had been stuck up front on a dais made of split boards.

That was where the representatives were to sit, as if they were in the dock: it was from that misshapen tribune that the
conscience of the people, using the voice of a few déclassés in long or short coats, would read the indictment and convince the jury—a jury of five or six hundred men whose verdict, although it did not have the force of law, would be no less threatening to those it condemned: the thumb of the People can permanently brand a man’s shoulder.

I was in a group orating and gesticulating passionately, discussing whom to propose as chairman.

Germain Casse was plotting for the office, going, coming—he needed to be seen.

Millière, who had worn his broadest-brimmed hat and put on his Quaker face, his eyes piercing and aflame behind his glasses, his lips pinched, his hands feverish, claimed the title as an honor due his past and his age, and he promised, chewing his words as fakirs chew glass, that he would be the evening’s Fouquier-Tinville.

It was decided that his name would be thrown to the crowd. The orders were sent to the bench leaders and only Casse still complained and groaned; he would have bitten Millière in the leg had he dared! But a blacksmith heard him growling and rubbed him behind the ears. He calmed down and went to curl up in a corner, his teeth still bare but his tail no longer up.

They had arrived. Ferry, Simon, Bancel, Pelletan.

Murmurs. They must have guessed at once that they were in the enemy camp. People barely moved enough to let them through.

How far they were from the trumpets and officers who produced fanfares and corteges before the president of the Chamber, how far from the ushers in black suits and silver chains!

Here were only poorly dressed men. The Parisian deputies could see socialists who had already begun their trial in public meetings and who, pale and resolute, were considering the charges to be read in the name of the sovereign people.

“Millière! Millière!”

He was ready and had to take few steps to reach his place before the green table.

“Will you speak, Vingtras?”

“No!”

I was not sure enough of myself and did not have the ear of the overalled tribunal as did those who had gone to the new clubs every evening and chewed the fat with their members.

I might have risked it if all that had to be said was not said. But all would be said!

I could see that in the glow of certain eyes; I could feel it in the tremor running through the room; I could read it even in the faces of the accused. They were serious, the Paris deputies were exchanging worried observations in low voices.

“Citizens, the meeting will come to order.”

The execution is about to begin. Briosne, whet your anger! Lefrançais, arm your scorn! Ducasse, load your tongue!

 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

XIV Briosne: a cross-eyed Christ in Barabba’s cap. But, not at all resigned to his fate, he jerks the spear from his side and rips open his hands removing the thorns still on the brow of this old man tortured on the Calvary called the Centrales.

Sent to jail for five years as a member of a secret society, released a few months early because he was spitting blood, he returned penniless to Paris without having been able to patch up his lungs—but with the soul of the Revolution nailed to his body!

A penetrating voice rising from a tortured heart as from a smashed cello, a tragic gesture, his arm extended as if to take an oath, shaken at times from head to foot with the quivers of an antique sybil; his eyes, which look like holes pricked by a knife, emit a gaze that breaks through the smoky ceilings of the club rooms, as a Christian preacher’s ecstatic glance
breaks through the cathedral vault and goes off in search of heaven.

His diseases and layoffs combined to give him time to study great books, and he squeezed out their sap and chewed on their marrow. That kept him going, it was like ox blood drunk warm in the slaughterhouse. He lives on his passion, his heart supports his chest; he even drew from his disease a theory, fearful on his lips, which, without his being aware of it, is the daughter of his suffering: "Capital would die if we did not lubricate the gears of its machines with human oil every morning; these steel and cast iron beasts must be groomed and driven by the worker."

He too must have his bronchia groomed, the bronchia exuding red sweat. He must have a few drops of that oil called wine inserted into his decrepit frame.

We must not think about it! He barely eats and he drinks only water. He works with artificial greenery and no one wants artificial greenery. Manipulating the tools of his trade is eating the rest of what he calls his life—poison is working in tandem with famine.

But that other poison called gas, the heavy emanation released by crowds huddled in overly narrow rooms, combats evil with evil. His fever rises and galvanizes him, stands him on his feet and carries him high.

After all, he will have had his share of existence! He lives for three hours. Every evening, more than other men live in a year—his eloquence expands present time, his dream encroaches upon the future; this sick man throws the health of his word to a legion of workers with athletic shoulders and iron chests, all of whom are moved to see the lungless proletarian killing himself to defend their rights.

Briosne is always with a small comrade, dressed like a capitalist in a frock coat; he walks slowly, his head a little to one side and an umbrella under his arm.

He looks like—you can barely tell one from the other—a man who, in Nantes in '48, stunned me with the boldness of his language. That boldness got him kicked out of the modest situation giving him enough to buy food. The authority he had acquired in the club humiliated and terrified his bosses. He had just been given his comeuppance and was bidding farewell to his people with simplicity and grandeur.

"I can no longer remain among you. I have the cross of hungry men on my back. I am going to Paris, where I may be able to sell my time for a little bread... where I may also be able, poor as I am, to give my life in order to plug a breach in one morning and aid a revolt."

A little later we learned he had given the gift he promised. His body, riddled by bullets, had been picked up at the foot of the Petit-Pont barricade—stone monument to this socialist driven to bay by famine and escaping into death.

Lefrançais reminds you of that man because of his pensive yellow face perforated by two deep, gentle eyes. When you first see him he looks like a man whose spirit has been broken, like a Christian. But his trembling lip betrays the fire of dedication, and the vibrations of his voice denounce the great soul of this umbrella carrier. The word springs up, warm and vibrant, in a tremolo of anger; but, as he wears the cap and clothes everyone else wears, so he uses the simple gestures of the people. His sentences do not burst into flame—though they burn!

That dreamer's head does not wiggle above the puny bust it surmounts. His clenched fist does not rattle the wood of the lectern. His gestures do not jab at the enemy's chest.

He leans on a book as he did when he was a teacher watching a class.

Sometimes, when he begins, he even looks as if he were giving a lesson and holding a ruler; but, the moment he gets to the guts of a question, he abandons his professional tone and abruptly becomes a molder of the ideas steaming under a hammer hitting them with all his strength. He strikes hard
and deep! He is the most fearsome of the tribunes because he's sober, rational . . . and bilious.

This is the bile of the people, of the immense mob with the sickly brow, and he has it in his blood, it bursts out in fulsome phrases and gives his improvisations the color of old gold.

This advocate of the bleeding masses pays the penalty for his revolutionary jaundice: he has the sensitivity of burned skin. This wounded man wounds others without intending to. But he is filled with honesty and courage—and his life speaks for his convictions as loudly as his eloquence. This Lefrançais is the great orator of the socialist party.

Ducasse—spread out: his round eyes are spread, his pointed elbows are spread, his silly legs are spread, his mouth is spread; it looks like a crack in his mug, a crack from which seeps a sharp, sniffly voice whose sound grates on your skin as well as in your ears.

"You look like a yellow cat sitting on hot coals," Dacosta once told him.

He also looks like a cat scratching its claws on the window of a room where, after being forgotten for three days, he has grown thin from lack of food and excess of rage.

That is indeed the double physiognomy of this carrot-topped kid who plays Marat with the bewildered expressions of Lasouche, who preaches the guillotine with puppet-like gestures, who assumes Grasso's accent to speak of "immortal principles," who says "Pshew! Pshew!" between two tirades on the convention.

Dry as a hundred deserts, match-thin arms, needle-like tibia, wire joints, grimacing and chattering like wooden jumping jacks at a shop entrance. So funny you could die when he plays the fierce buffoon at a table in a café, where he downs beer after beer that the bartender cannot defend against his comic and threatening orders.

"If you put on a stiff collar, I'll put a hemp tie around it for you. If you don't bring two more for me and the citizen—

and fill 'em up!—your head will roll at the next Session. Lubricate the people, hurry up!"

The poor proprietor hurries up, instinctively passing the back of his hand over his neck.

"Pshew! Pshew!"

In public, Pshew-Pshew comes on with a severed head. He gravely climbs the stairs to the speakers' platform, his pupils spinning, his brow wrinkled, the three saffron hairs of his goatee hanging like a guardman's, wrapped in a frock coat that cramps his movements and whose cloth he punctures with his bones, wearing pants the color of burned amadou whose cuffs corkscrew over women's boots of gray twill. His toes are so thin and emaciated that his foetus' feet still have plenty of room to dance around even in that footwear.

He clasps to his ribs a briefcase that looks as if it belongs to a process-server or a high-school teacher. Long use has rubbed white sores on its black skin, but the audience still looks at this portfolio with respect.

It seems to contain the files of the Revolution, orders to be delivered to the rich, a death sentence for the robber barons, a notice to be put on the door leading to the Committee of Public Safety.

Thanks to this briefcase, he looks like an austere plodder completely absorbed in the duties imposed by his life as socialist Benedictine or methodical terrorist. Thus, after he has set his little body in place behind the lectern and opened his leather portfolio slowly, ever so slowly, to remove some note that he reads as a priest reads the verse of the Gospel he has chosen as his text for the day, the audience whispers, "Shhhh!" People wipe their noses the way they do at church before the beginning of the sermon, and even the hard-as-nails, those whose opinion it is that "it must be the way it was in '93," listen religiously while casting side glances at the neighbors they suspect of moderation.

"I'm damn sure he wouldn't hesitate to make heads roll!"
That was said for my benefit... I just might hesitate, it seems. In the Desnoyers hall I have the reputation of a man who would not do "what our fathers did," who would recoil before the grand methods, who, as the third tumbril drove up to the blade, would tell the executioner to go have a drink and eat a little something.

But Ducasse, that's another story; he would do "what our fathers did" and would personally bring a box lunch to the guillotine so no time would be lost.

"Yes, citizens, I shall not have truly accomplished my civic duties, I shall not consider myself worthy of my august title of revolutionary, until the day when, with my own hand, I chop off an aristocratic head."

And he chops, first with the gesture of a clown at play—people love a farcical, bold movement—then with the majesty of a man killing a Stuart or a Capet, holding his axe up to the sunlight before bringing it down on a royal neck and removing a head until that moment sacred and inviolable.

His tongue licks the guillotine blade; he draws the cord up over the pulley of a bloody and amusing eloquence; laughing, he hangs on the rope like a monkey gripping the executioner's bellpull with its tail.

Eleven p.m. Yes, all that had to be said was said! I have just felt the existence of an unknown party mining the streets under the feet of the bourgeois republic; I have seen the approaching storm. Unrecallable words burst into flame under the ceiling as heat lightning flashes across the sky about to crack open.

And the Parisian deputies left the hall, bruised and shrunken, pale before the death agony of their popularity.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

XV January 10, 1870 We were in the Richelieu library.
"Fantastic! They say Pierre Bonaparte just killed his tailor!"
The speaker had a pair of glasses, a long nose, a thick beard, a mocking mouth, a raspy voice; his name was Rigault.

"Great, great! A Bonaparte in the clink and no tailor brave enough to ask you to pay his "little bill." But no joke, if this is true we've got to find out and raise hell."
"Who told you about it?"
"A former spy the police fired, the note-taker, Machin. You know, the one in charge of a book against the force. You want to go to the Marseillaise?"
"Yeah, let's hurry!"

Comrades joined us along the way. "It wasn't a tailor, it was one of you..."
"A newspaperman?"
"Yeah, dead as a door-nail. Let's go to rue d'Aboukir."
"Look, Vingtras, I feel sorry for the guy, but, Goddamn it, it's the best thing that could have happened for the Revolution."

Great things! It was indeed a fellow journalist who got it. It was Victor Noir.
"Yes, it seems that the junior shithead smashed his chest with a bullet. But I hear he's not dead."
"Not dead!... Who's coming with me?"
"Where to?"
"To Bonaparte's place. Auteuil, Passy, I don't really know—where Noir went this morning... Habeneck, give us a hundred francs."

"We need more than money, we need weapons!" yelled Humbert and Maroteau.

Habeneck, the paper's assistant editor, had to be reassured.
"What? Here's fifty francs, take a cab, hurry over... but why weapons? One victim's more than enough... you might lose the advantage and lose things up... leave the murder- ing to the murderer."
"Should we leave him the man he murdered, too?"
"All aboard for Auteuil!"
We were rich: fifty pieces of silver and ten pieces of lead.
The buggy limped along. Dusk was falling. It was cool on the quais.

"Where did you tell me to stop?" asked the driver, who could not remember and who was looking worriedly around the sad streets we had taken him to. We had given him some address, the first destination we could think of.

"We'll tell you when you're close."

We were close.

No sign of a drama! We went up to the few passers-by one by one. They knew nothing.

"Where is Prince Pierre's house?"

"There... No... Down that way."

But we saw a red lantern: a police station.

No hesitation, up and at 'em!

"Excuse me, we work for the Marseillaise. We understand that M. Victor Noir..."

"Is wounded. You are correct, sir."

"Seriously wounded?"

He made a gesture of despair and disappeared.

Noir had been taken to his brother's house in Neuilly, on a calm, silent street where a few trees raised their bare black branches above new houses exhaling peace and smelling of plaster.

"Passage Masséna, here it is."

The older brother came to us. We questioned him with our eyes, he answered with silence.

Without saying a word, he led us into a darkening room and left us in the presence of the corpse.

It was lying on a bed that had not been turned down, its face almost smiling. It looked like an enormous sleeping baby; its hands were still enclosed in black kid gloves, which also made it resemble an usher for a wedding who had come to take a nap while everyone else was amusing himself in the garden.

His legs wore kerseymere trousers he had bought at the Belle Jardinière—the fop—to wear on special occasions; and the shirt front clinging to his large chest, although unbroken, was soiled by a single blue stain. A bullet had made that particular stain while piercing his heart.

"I hope he didn't suffer terribly."

"No, but we have to make sure he's buried terribly!"

Rushed, fiery words from our anguish-dried lips.

"Should we take him with us?... It would be just like February of '48... We could set him in a tumbril like the men shot in the boulevard des Capucines and call the people to arms as we move down the streets."

"That's it!"

The voices were choked but the tone was firm.

"Will the driver let us take the body?"

"He won't know anything about it. We can put his coat back on and carry him down as if he were sick. At the bottom of the stairs we'll stick his hat on his head and pile him into the cab."

Even Louis did not hesitate. He agreed to let us take his brother.

But we suddenly got cold feet.

"There are only four of us, we can't make a whole country rise up!"

And, unfortunately for the Revolution, we were too modest—or too cowardly. We discarded our trump; we did not dare risk betting those bloody stakes.

Back to town.

It was no longer light, and when we turned around to look through the cab windows at the house where our friend was lying, it seemed to us that we saw him leaning on the window-sill, staring at us with his enlarged eyes.

It was his brother offering his moist brow and reddened eyes to the evening breeze.
Our throats contracted. They were as alike as two drops of blood.

*At the Marseillaise*  Paris knew about the crime!
The editors had set up permanent residence at the newspaper office and republicans came running from all sides.
Fonvielle arrived with a hole in his overcoat—a bullet had made him a new place to put his carnation. He told what he had seen: the pistol out of the pocket, aiming at Noir, Noir hit, running away, his hat crushed in his clenched fist, death in his heart.

“And what about you?” we were asked.
We described our trip, the idea we had had.
“But where would you have put him?”
“Here... In a slum area... At Rochefort’s. His residence is inviolable.”
The last thesis found passionate defenders. “As a deputy, he has the right to hold out by force, with sword and gun, those who try to cross his threshold. And who knows? The rue de Provence isn’t all that far from the Tuileries.”
I would have preferred to lay Victor Noir on our worktable as if it were a slab in the morgue and leave him there all night, to be guarded by men dressed in overalls or business clothes, as the mob chose.
“We’d have to have him to do that.”
“Let’s go get him!”

But the words of revolutions had been spoken: “Too late.”
That house was surely surrounded and under observation by now.
What journalists we had been!
And we had such a lovely opportunity! Should you let daring cool off in civil wars? Doesn’t a man ready to risk his life without flinching have the right to erect his barricade as he sees fit and set a corpse in command of it—if a dead man is more fearsome than a living one!
He was as large as a giant. His head was so big it would have taken twenty direct hits to blow it off his Herculean shoulders.

Meanwhile, Paris was moving. There was a meeting in Belleville. People were packing the large Folies hall with their trembling bodies. Above the dais, mourning bunting, and, in the shadow of those rags, explosions of fury against the murderer, a battle planned around a coffin.

“This can’t go on!”
Yet another sentence that had been heard in the past, during the tragic hours; a phrase gathered in distant history and leaving the cemetery of yesterday’s insurrectionists to become the motto of tomorrow’s insurrectionists.

Women everywhere—a good sign!
When women get involved, when the housewife gives her man a push, when she snatches up the black flag floating over her pot to stand it between two paving stones, it means that the sun will rise over a city in revolt.

*January 12*  We were to meet for the funeral.
But the procession should have left from the Marseillaise; the rally should have been in the street in front of the newspaper. The already excited quarter would have been invaded by angry demonstrators, no one would have set out before being joined by thousands more like him.
Who can say that that human tornado would not have blown over infantry and artillery, soaked the Empire’s powder supply and carried the Napoleons away like decaying carrion? It just might have happened.

*Under the Odeon*  Rigault was in command of the maneuver; like a sergeant berating recruits, like a shepherd’s dog worrying a flock, he put some in line and barked at others.
“Ranks of four, keep close together! Get back in line, God-damn it!”
Serious words: “Those with pistols up front.”
Funny words: “Those with knocking knees in the middle.”

In the rear those who have only scalpels, compasses, pocket-knives—which, for that matter, make a frightening wound—steel or iron pipe hidden under work clothes . . . for this Latin Quarter column is filled with workers.

They were the students’ neighbors and had become their comrades in the Renaissance conspiracy or in some other abortive, decimated plot. They had joined socialist committees to help the supporters of candidates Rochefort and Cantagrel. Students and workers had drunk spiked coffee together on election day and had eaten the same slop in Mazas prison.

Rigault has more confidence in the men from the workshops than in those from the libraries; that’s why he had them bring up the rear. They’ll stick the middle ranks in the ass to make them move on, and they’ll slash them to pieces if they try to run away.

He told me this while dipping snuff, dipping snuff without a break, his chin stained, his vest filthy, his nostrils burned, but with something like pride on his brow and in his eyes.

He made his snuffbox grate in the Robert-Macaire manner; he also made me think—the fox—of Napoleon taking a pinch of tobacco from his pocket while outlining the battle plans to his officers.

You can’t deny it, he’s quite a fellow!

When he caresses his revolver the way you rub a baby’s cheek and says, “There, there, honey, there, there,” before adding, playfully threatening it with his finger, “You’d better keep on your toes, kid, and get ready to fart on the cops,” he reassures the middle ranks, which do not believe people would be horning around like that if this were really it.

And it does not displease the more resolute, who feel that this urchin with glasses and a heart will spit bullets as well as filth in the teeth of the soldiers, that he will offer them his breast as readily as he offers them his ass—heroic or base as the situation is tragic or burlesque.

On the March “Forward!”

Five or six spectacle-wearers put themselves in the front row, young men with a reflective air about them.

Rigault was the only one in the group who looked scatter-brained, and even his face would have appeared serious if he had not purposely brushed his hair straight up, made his voice harsh and shrill and assumed the pose of a puppy raising its leg to dishonor monuments so he could better express his opinion of the clergy, the aristocracy, the courts, the army and the Sorbonne.

Breuillé, Granger, Dacosta, they looked like professors of science whose eyes had been burned by too many books. The veterans of the people’s column asked one another how these four-eyes had got to be leaders.

They remembered neither Saint-Just, nor Desmoulins, nor the Montagnards, nor the Girondists. You could hear them saying the so-called deputies of the left were idiots and traitors. What faction did they represent? They were Blanqui’s men.

From all sides, in small groups or in battalions like ours, Paris was moving toward Neuilly, marching in step when there were a hundred men, marching arm in arm when there were four.

These were fragments of an army seeking other fragments, shreds of a Republic stuck together by the dead man’s blood, the beast that Prudhomme calls the hydra of anarchy extending its thousand heads, all held to the body by a single idea, hot coals of anger glowing deep in two thousand eyes.

Tongues were not hissing, the red cloth was barely moving, no one had anything to say to his neighbor for everyone knew what he wanted.

Their hearts were swollen with the hope of battle—their pockets were swollen as well.
Anyone searching this conglomeration would have found all the tools of Paris' workbenches, all the metal of Paris' kitchens: knives, gimlets, leather cutters, drills, kept in cases now but ready to leave the box and pierce a rat's skin. Just show us one...we'll slash his throat for you just like that!

And the cops better watch it! If they show their weapons, we'll put our work tools up against their murder tools!

Even the idle had something to offer: the handles of expensive pistols were growing warm in hot, gloved hands.

Occasionally one of those bars filed into the shape of a dagger or the mouth of one of those revolvers peeped out from under a half-closed overcoat. But nobody worried about it. On the contrary, those who glimpsed someone else's weapon indicated with a proud smile that they too were ready and willing to talk back to the police—or the soldiers.

The police were mute! The soldiers invisible!

That's what was making me think. Who could say that we would not soon be caught under withering fire from a closed house with locked shutters set off by the first insult to the Empire shouted by a hothead or an infiltrator?

"But that's just what we need!" said a neighbor who looked like one of the Carbonari. "The middle class has come out of its shops and joined the people. Now they're all our prisoners, and we'll hold them in front of the cannon until they're blown to bits the way we used to be. Then they'll be the ones to scream in pain, they'll give the signal for insurrection. Our job will be to sneak to the head of the movement and gun down the whole frigging group, bourgeois and Bonapartists alike!"

A serious face turned toward us, a wrinkled hand was laid on my arm. It was Mabille, who had just arrived and had heard the theories of that algebraist of massacre. He was approving with his gray face.

I asked him if he was armed.

"No, it's a lot better for me to be murdered without having anything to defend myself with. The sentimentalists will make words about the unarmed old man shot down in cold blood by drunken soldiers. It'll be good, believe me!...Ah, if only we could get some blood!" he concluded, his blue eyes filled with gentle sweetness.

"All we have to do is shoot first."

"No, no! It has to be the government rifles that start it."

Passage Masséna Rigault, myself, a few others, all made our way through the multitude, which opened to let us pass.

It was not proud and did not complain about being left behind. At supremely decisive moments, it likes to see people it recognizes walking before it as living posters proclaiming the ideas attached like a trademark to the syllables of their names.

What's happening?

A colossus, standing on a chair, was, with words and fists, defending the entrance to the street against the first ranks of the procession. It was the older brother, the man who, a few nights earlier, had offered his still-warm brother to help heat up the insurrection.

He had grown cold along with the corpse.

And today he was refusing the coffin to Flourens, who, pale but with blazing eyes, was attempting to requisition it for the greater good of the Revolution. He wanted the cortège to pass through all of Paris—so we could use the front of the casket as a battering ram armed with a skull and smash in the walls of the Tuileries.

They would come tumbling down before dusk if we seized this opportunity and turned the horses' heads now aimed at Neuilly cemetery back toward Père-Lachaise.

"Monsieur Vingtras, do you think there'll be fighting?"

I did not know the man speaking to me. He gave his name.

"I am Charles Hugo... You're on bad terms with my father (a matter of schools!), but it looks as if you're not at all on bad terms with the energetic men around here. Could you do a favor for a fellow journalist and get me a seat up front? It
would be easy for you, you seem to be almost in command of all these people.”

“No one’s in command, get that straight! Not even Rochefort and Delescluze, who would soon be completely forgotten if some street orator produced a dazzling flash of lightning, even if he just made the sun break through the cloudy sky. . . . Still, I’ll see.”

See whom? See what?

“Which is best, Paris or Neuilly?” asked Brions, fever in his eyes and in his voice, as he grabbed my collar.

“What the people want is best!”

_Avenue de Neuilly_ The people did not want battle, in spite of Flourens’ desperate pleas, in spite of the stubbornness of a few heroes who tried to grab the men by the guts as they pulled the horses by the nose.

“The staff of the Rue up front!” some groups of revolutionaries shouted two or three times.

“Don’t lead these people to the slaughterhouse, Vingtras.”

So you believe a man can lead anybody to the slaughterhouse? No more than you can impose wisdom or cowardice on crowds.

They carry their mute will within themselves, and all the harangues in the world can’t do a thing to change it!

People say that insurrection breaks out when leaders preach it.

That’s just not true!

Two hundred thousand men with a taste for battle in their guts have no ears for captains who say, “Don’t fight.” They walk over the officers’ bodies if the officers get in their way, and use their broken carcasses to help mount the attack.

Mabile had been right. If the government rifles had popped off without provocation, if some insane order had brought a regiment and a volley of shots to this house, ahh! Then the popular tribunes would have had but one word to say, one gesture to make, and the Republic’s flag would have sprung up in the streets and remained flying until torn to shreds by the cannonballs fired at thousands of corpses.

But neither the people nor the men of the Empire really felt like having it out once and for all over the grave of a little murdered newspaperman—bad terrain for a military victory, too confining a space to set forth the social idea.

At one time someone came to my group to get me. “Rochefort’s about to faint. Go see what’s happening . . . pull the last order from him.”

I found him, pale as a corpse, sitting in the back room of a grocery store.

“Not to Paris!” he said, trembling.

Outside, people were waiting for his answer. I scampere up on a stool and gave it the way I had heard it.

“But you!” shouted Flourens, “You, Vingtras, aren’t you with us?”

He had caught us up to us quickly, all disheveled, his eyes aflame, beautiful in sorrow, and he threw himself on me.

“Not with you? I’m with you if the crowd is.”

“It’s made up its mind. Look at the procession, it’s marching toward us.”

“Fine! Let’s march toward it.”

“Great! Thanks. Forward!”

Flourens grasped my hand and passed us. With the faith and strength of a saint, he broke into the mob with his thin shoulders and spread it apart as a swimmer rushing to rescue a drowning man spreads apart the ocean.

But suddenly, in the rear, noise, shouts.

It was Rochefort joining us in a carriage. What was up?

An idea had just been broached.

“To the Assembly!”

I leapt on this gratefully, and so did Rochefort.
“To the Assembly!” It had been decided.
And the hearse heading for the cemetery did an about-face and rolled toward Paris.

I took a seat beside Rochefort, as did Grousset; and there we were, silent and pensive, being carried God knows where.
I was saying softly to myself that if they let us reach the Chamber it would be invaded, that we were about to see a May 15 accomplished by two hundred thousand men—a quarter of them bourgeois.

There were two hundred thousand of them!
When we put our heads out the window, we saw a street rolling and overflowing like the bed of a vast river in flood.
The pistols and knives were still hidden, but the stirring weapon of the “Marseillaise” was being openly brandished.
The earth trembled under the feet of that multitude that seemed to be marching in step, and the refrain of the hymn was rising to strike the sky with its wing.
“Halt!”
Troops barred the way.
Rochefort got out. “I am a deputy and have the right to pass!”
“You shall not pass.”
I looked behind me. All along the avenue, the procession was falling apart, breaking up. It was late, people were tired, they had sung.
The day was over.

A small old man was hobbling near me, alone, all alone, but followed, I could see, by the eyes of a group in which I recognized friends of Blanqui.
That's who it was, the man walking along that wall after having strolled all day on the slopes of the volcano, looking above the crowd for the spurring flame that was to be the first burst of the red flag.
That lonely old man was Blanqui!

“And just what do you think you’re doing?”
I had remained nailed in place, stupefied to see such calm and such emptiness arise so suddenly.
“You're going to get yourself arrested,” said the painter Lançon as he pulled me away.
In the puddles the rain had left in the square, we found exhausted, muddy comrades.
We ate together. A few were advised not to sleep at home.
The artist took me with him when we left.
But they did not dare arrest anyone. They were only too happy to have gotten out of it with so little trouble.
A bad sign for the Empire! Lack of soldiers had prevented it from sending infiltrators to start something. It's hesitating, it's waiting—its days are numbered. It has a bullet in its heart as surely as Victor Noir has.

XVI  July 15  Watch out for the red bubble!
They need it, they want it! Poverty is flooding them, socialism is invading them.
On the banks of the Spree as well as beside the Seine, the poor are suffering. But there's something new, this time their suffering has advocates in overalls, the patient is healthy, there's barely time to bleed him. They'd better hurry if they want the sap of fresh strength to escape through the cut, if they want the sanitary sound of cannon to drown the fire of the mob as the sound of thunder is a signal that the murderous electricity has died in the earth.
We shall be conquered or be conquerors, but in either case the movement of the people will be shredded by lines of bayonets and dissipated by the zigzagging flashes of victories and defeats.
Those are the thoughts of the middle-class tenders of French and German flocks, and they sit on high and see far away.
Besides, the red pants and the Compiègne kneebreeches doubt not at all that French regiments will soon be marching
triumphantiy through a defeated Germany.
To Berlin! To Berlin!

I was almost killed on a street corner by a handful of warriors to whom I had screamed my horror of war. They called me a Prussian and would probably have torn me to bits if I had not shouted my name.
Then they let me go—grudgingly.
"He may not be one, but he's not a damn bit better than they are. He doesn't believe in the Fatherland; brothers and friends, his sort doesn't give a shit about the insults hurled at us by the cabinets of Europe."
I think a shit is just about what I do give.

Every evening I have arguments that would end in duels if the men insisting on letting me know where they stand did not say that they had to keep their skins whole so they could face the enemy. And the greatest chauvinists I meet are often bearded sophisticates, men of '48, old soldiers who throw up to me the epic of the fourteen armies of the Mayence garrison, the Sombre-et-Meuse volunteers and the 32d brigade. They kick me with the wooden shoes of the Muscelle battalion; they stick me in the eye with Carnot's finger and Kléber's plume.

We took a piece of linen, wrote "Peace" on it with a wooden peg dipped in a bowl of ink, and carried it through Paris.
We were attacked.

There were some police infiltrators among the aggressors, but there had been no need for them to give the signal. They simply fell in with the dominant rage and chose those they remembered seeing at meetings, on the day of the Baudin demonstration or at Victor Noir's funeral. As soon as a man was recognized, he was dispensed with by a weighted club or stick. Bauer almost had his skull cracked, someone else was thrown into the canal.
At times cowardly second thoughts, criminal remorse takes hold of my spirit.

Yes, my heart is contracted by regret—I regret my sacrificed youth, the life I have given to starvation, the pride I have given to the dogs, the future I have spoiled for a mob I thought had a soul, a mob I wanted to honor by giving it all the strength I had so painfully amassed.
And now I see that very same mob sucking up to soldiers, dogging the steps of regiments, cheering colonels whose epaulets are still sticky with the blood of December, shouting "Kill them!" when we say we want to silence the trumpets by ramming rags up their bells.
It is the greatest disillusionment of my life.

Despite all my shame and disappointment, I always hoped that the public square would one day avenge me. On that public square I have just been beaten black and blue; my body is covered with bruises and my heart is weary.
If tomorrow some ship offered to take me on and bear me to the end of the world, I would go—a disgruntled deserter performing the ultimate act of insubordination.

"But can't you hear the "Marseillaise"?"
I am appalled by your "Marseillaise" and what you have made of it. It has become a State Hymn. It does not inspire volunteers, it leads flocks of sheep. What was a fire gong in the night has become a tinkling bell around the necks of beasts.
What cock is crowing in clear tones to give new life to weakening regiments? What thought is rippling in the folds of the flag? In '93 the bayonets sprang from the earth with an idea on their points—like a fat loaf of bread.
"Le jour de gloire est arrivé!"
You bet!

Place du Palais-Bourbon  We were in front of the Assembly building, the three of us, Theisz, Avrial and myself, the day war was declared.
It was sunny, we could see pretty women dressed for hot weather, flowers on their breasts.
The Minister of War or somebody else had just arrived.

"At least we had the boulevard"
frisky as a colt, in a carriage with a new body pulled by horses with silver bits.

It looked like a great hoity-toity festival, a gala ceremony, a Te Deum at Notre Dame Cathedral; the smell of velvet and gardenias was floating in the air.

Nowhere was there any sign of the dread or profound emotion that should twist hearts when someone announces that the Fatherland is about to draw its sword.

Cheers! Shouts!
The die had been cast. They had crossed the Rubicon.

Six O’clock Silently, desperately, we went through the Tuileries.

So much blood had rushed to my head I felt as if it were about to split. But no! That blood belonging to France came stupidly out my nose. Alas! I was stealing from my country, to which I owed all that flowed from my veins, and flowed, and kept flowing.

My snout and fingers were red, my handkerchief seemed to have been used in an amputation, and the enthusiastic people returning from the Palais-Bourbon drew back in disgust as I passed. But weren’t they the same people who had applauded the vote condemning the nation to bleed from its every pore?

My tomato nose upset them!... Idiots!... Cannon fodder!

“He should hide his hands,” said with a scowl a bearded man who, a little while before, had shouted until he could shout no more.

I cleaned up the mess in a basin.

But the mothers stuck in their bit. “Does he think he has the right to scare swans and children?” they asked, calling their babies, two or three of whom were decked out in Zouave uniforms.

The Red Cross All the journalists were agog. Who could get to the army first?

A battalion of medics had been organized. Those who had been medical students, even if only for fifteen minutes, and who had some old registration form in their Bohemian pocket to prove it, signed up with a philanthropic doctor serving surgery with a Genevan sauce. He had invented a costume that made those in it look like a black hunter or a tourist in mourning, and the volunteers put on a religious or funereal expression when they put on his outfit.

I saw them coming out of the Palace of Industry. The sergeant in the lead was the assistant editor of the Marseillaise, the very one who, although willing to give us a few sous, refused us pistols the day Victor Noir was murdered; a fine lad, warlike as a peacock, strutting and spreading his pack like a huge feathery fan.

Those teams of nurses setting out for the battlefields, left foot first, could boast many serious men. But how many romantics and hams were also among them!

The park and square are covered with groups of men, half in uniform, half in mufti, being made to run, stamp, square off, circle up.

“Repel cavalry attack! Ready! Repel infantry attack! Five paces apart, watch it there!... Stick your elbows in!... Nine, you’re out of line!... Left, right! Left, right!” And elbows are stuck in and nine sucks in his gut. Left, right! Left, right!

So?

Do you think that men maintain the proper distance and wield bayonets like those metronomes when, after suddenly meeting the enemy, they find themselves in the heat of battle in some meadow, field or cemetery?

Every day detachments form at the railway stations, but they look more like a mob breaking up than a regiment marching off. They roll past in grossly oversized waves with bottles tied onto their packs.

And, in the mixed beats of my heart, I feel defeat riding, and death in the rear...
on the cavalry's horses, I look at all those pots and pans on
the infantry's backs and see disaster.

They're setting out for this as if they were going to a bar-be-
cue . . . I have an idea that a rainstorm of shells will spoil
their appetite before they've finished peeling the potatoes and
skinning the onions.

They'll really make you cry, those particular onions!

No one listens to me.

It's the way it was in December, when I predicted a rout.
They told me that I did not have the right to discourage those
who might have otherwise agreed to fight.

Now they shout at me, "You're a criminal, you're slandering
our country!"

A little more and they'll arrest me for betraying the Father-
land to the enemy.

*Place Vendôme* They just arrested me!

I was seized at the head of a group lamenting the true de-
feats, furious at the false victories and shouting, "Down with
Ollivier!"

Recognized and pointed out, I was hustled to the front. It
was a great honor, but what a rain of blows! There was no-
thing missing: kicks in the kidneys, saber hilts in the ribs; take
that, insurrectionist!

They formed a group of ten to drag me to the headquarters
of the national guard.

"He's a spy!" bleated those who saw me pass.

And because I responded by calling them imbeciles, some
bourgeois bayonets were fighting for the joy of running me
through when a lieutenant in command of the post snatched
me away from the blood-thirsty soldiers.

He knew me, he had seen a cartoon of me as a dog with a
saucenpan tied to my tail.

"What! It's you? . . . But I like your kind. . . . You were
almost cut up? . . . They missed their chance! But I hear
they're damn sure going to send you to Cayenne. Damn sure!"

He was right. The Ministry of Justice ordered me delivered
to its agents.

They formed a square around me with their four black
profiles. We looked like Chinese shadow figures when we left.

Our steps could be heard in the silent night; the noctam-
bulists came up to look.

A stop at police headquarters. Interrogated, searched, locked
up.

A courier trotted over on his horse with a dispatch concern-
ing me.

Transfer to the main jail.

I collapsed on a plank between an amputated beggar rubbing
herbs on his sores and a boy with a distinguished but fright-
ened face who, on seeing I was more or less well-dressed,
cowered against me and said very softly, his teeth clenched, his
breath coming in gasps: "I'm a sculptor . . . I hadn't wet my
clay . . . I hadn't fed my cat . . . I was going to buy it some
lungs . . . I was taken with the republicans."

He ran out of breath. "And you?" he concluded painfully.

"I wasn't going to buy lungs for my pet. I have no cat, I have
opinions."

"Your name?"

"Vingtras."

"Oh my God!"

He leaped away, rolled up in his coat and stuck his head
under it like an ostrich.

But he brought it back out after a time and, his voice quak-
ing, almost kissing my ear, whispered, "When the guards come,
you'll pretend not to know me, won't you?"

"Don't worry. Good night . . . Hey cripple, pull in your
flippers!"

Time to get up; the artist was painful to watch.

He was the first to be interrogated.

"I didn't do anything . . . I was going to buy lungs for my
cat. . . . I'm a sculptor. . . . I had not wet my clay. . . . Am I going to be released? . . . I'm for order."
"For or against, we don't give a damn! Take him away."

Me, I was an old hand.
The turnkeys could guess that and we chatted on the way to the cell. "You've been here before, haven't you? . . . I could tell right away. With Blanqui? Delescluze? Mégy? I met them all. Do you want some?" And he offered me his tobacco pouch.

They let me go out for a breath of air—still inside four walls but under an open sky.
Some commotion required the guards' presence elsewhere, so the prisoners were left alone half-way through their walk. A man approached me and touched my shoulder . . . not a man, a ghost! A visitor from the land of the beyond!

"Don't you recognize me?"
It did seem that I had seen that faded coat, which had in several respects come to resemble an empty sack.
"I'm a sculptor."
"Oh yeah . . . the clay . . . the cat . . . the lungs. . . ."
"What do you think they're going to do to us?"
"They're going to shoot us."
"Shoot us! . . . But I had something to do!"
"What?"
"Didn't I tell you my name?"
"No."
"Francia."
Francia! Oh great, this was just incredible! He had been given the task of making a statue to represent the Republic at war—sword drawn!

I was still waiting to be interrogated; waiting, filled with anguish.
A guard trusted me, and I learned that there had been a stormy demonstration in front of the Chamber a few days before. That afternoon, he claimed, there was to be another one, this time led by Rochefort; they must have gone to Sainte-Pélage prison to get him.

To the questions.
"You are charged with inciting civil war."
I tried to explain myself.
The magistrate stopped me with a look and a gesture. "Since you have been here, sir, great misfortunes have struck France, she needs all her children. Even the officer who ordered your arrest asked for the prison doors to be opened to you; you are a free man."
He had spoken without affectation, and his voice had broken when he mentioned "great misfortunes."
I left headquarters sadder than when I entered.

I ran for the posters. Those large white papers spread on walls frightened me, for they looked like the pale death mask of the Fatherland.
What had happened?
Admit it, deep down you were sad rather than happy when you heard the Emperor had a victory to his credit. You suffered when you thought the triumph was real—almost as much as Naquet, the hunchback, who wept with rage.
And now a cloud has veiled your eyes and they're brimming with tears.
For two days my eyes and heart were wholly involved in the news of what was happening. I listened only to the echo of distant cannon and the noise of the street.
Everything was so still!

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

XVII Ten A.M. a knock.
"Come in."
It was a big fellow whose completely colorless face, buried
in a huge black beard, bore the eyeglasses of a German student and the hat of a South Italian bandit.

"Don't you recognize me?"
"Lord no!"
"Brideau . . . I was one of your pupils at Caen."

Right, I remembered. During my temporary tenure in the rhetoric chair, I had had a kid with that name in the group I advised to do nothing.

"Well, what have you been doing?"
"Starving! . . . Once I got my degree, I decided to study law. My father was able to support me for three terms, no more. He's a small country accountant. I thought he was more or less rich, but he wept and admitted that he was poor, very poor . . . I was confident because of my reputation for writing good themes, so I went from school to school anyway. . . . How stupid! If you've studied in Paris, you've got contacts, you're under the protection of your old professors; but if you're a good theme writer from the provinces dreaming of going to school between Montrouge and Montmartre, you might as well jump in the river first thing, there's no reason to wait. . . . I was braver, I became a worker, a worker in an engraving shop. I was never very good at it, but I got by, I earned what you might call a living with my awkward etching. How many times I thought of you and what you told us about formal education! Back then, I believed you were joking. If I had only listened to you! . . . But that's not what I'm here for. . . . I didn't come to sob out my life's story. I've been a member of a Blanquist section for the last three years. The sections are going to march!"

I seized his hands. "The sections are going to march, you say? . . . I don't want to hear about it, don't tell me anything, keep your secret! I don't want to share the responsibility for a plan that will fail, whose only result will be to send good people to Mazas or the Centrales."

"I'm here on a mission. Yesterday we were talking about people likely to cock an ear if they heard a pistol shot somewhere. Your name was one of the first on Blanqui's lips; he's heard about you from comrades and decided you should be informed. . . . Now you can do what you like. I know nobody makes you go where you don't want to, but this afternoon at two o'clock be in front of the La Villette fire station and you'll see the beginning of the insurrection."

1:30 I was there.

They were too, damn it! Four bald men: Brideau; Eudes, who nodded to me and was answered by a wink; a tanned boy in a cap, his pince-nez on his nose; and an old man with a long, gentle head who stooped slightly—plus one volunteer with all his hair.

Blanqui was standing next to the street vendor.

"Taratarataratabang, bang, bang!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm selling itching powder! You're visiting a minister's wife, you're snuffing the candle. . . . You just throw some of my concoction. . . ."

And the clown shouted his rigamarole, occasionally walking over to his drum to beat out a tira or a bang with blurred drumsticks.

Tell me, Brideau, is it on this country-fair drum that you're going to sound the charge?

"Ah, the two of us have had something to take care of for a long time, Citizen Vingtras! I've got you . . . and I'm not going to let you go."

I had run into a mechanic from my quarter with whom I'd had some harsh quarrels at times. He was a communist, I was not.

Oh no, he wasn't going to let me go! And he forced me to give him a little lesson.

He started in, I replied. But my mind was elsewhere. In spite of myself I was listening to the warm breeze blowing over our
heads to see if it bore an echo of shots, and when the guy asked me to detail my objections to collective property, I was thinking of Brideau, Eudes and Blanqui.

Why had the mountebank’s drum stopped playing?

“You can’t think of anything to say, admit it!” said the mechanic, gleefully tapping his glass against mine. “Ah, if we ever get power!”

Power? Six men over there next to the vendor are in the process of seizing it.

But I did not inform the comrade. I didn’t think I had the right. I was content to ask him if he thought a movement commanded by brave men would be enough to make the people rise against the Empire.

He took out a match and slowly rubbed his hip with it. “That’s all it would take. One spark and everything would blow up. That’s all it would take!”

“You think so, friend?”

But if something had happened, we’d know about it here.

... Nothing!

They must have been picked up in the crowd without having had time to spit, while the con man was hiding the pea under the shell and spies were picking out suspicious characters.

Four O’clock No sound, no noise!

The workers were in their Sunday best, out for a stroll with their wives, who were also dressed up; big sisters were dragging little brothers around picture shops and candy stores. There were flowers in calloused hands, and you could see on all those laborers’ faces that they needed rest.

Sunday’s just a bad day for insurrections!

People don’t want to get their good clothes dirty, they’ve saved up a few sous for a trip to a bar, this is the only afternoon they have to be with their own, to visit their grandfather and their friends.

You must not sound the call to arms on days when the poor get dressed up; those days mean too much to them. They’ve been shut in their dark rooms for a whole week, dreaming of spending time in a sidewalk café hung with green things.

The poet Gustave Mathieu and the hairy Regnard came up to me at a Bouillon Duval table where I had just sat down and informed me that around thirty individuals had charged the La Villette fire station and fired at the police.

They surely must have hit one or two.

“Criminals!” said Mathieu.

“Imbeciles!” said Regnard, who was a Blanquist and was supposed to have been with them.

Imbeciles! Criminals! Those good, brave men!

Have to talk that over one of these days.

A slip had led to the arrest of Eudes and Brideau.


How to get them out of that?

Maybe a letter from a popular, renowned man would carry some weight and help sway public opinion.

And we tried to decide who should write and sign this ultimate letter.

It was difficult to do.

The condemned individuals had proclaimed that they would reject all appeals for pardon presented to the Empire, and we did not feel much like being servile in their name even in order to save them.

Men convinced they are right are terrible!

But it was felt that if a great man, someone like Michelet, were to talk, his voice would be heard ... and maybe heeded.

We went to see him: Rogeard, Humbert, Regnard, myself, a few others.

He showed himself to us as he was: solemn and feminine, eloquent and bizarre.

He quickly agreed to the proposal, and then all we had to
do was decide to whom this missive would be addressed; we
could not let anyone think we were begging, but our goal was
nevertheless to kill the death sentence.

"To the leaders of the Defense," I suggested.
"Good, very good."

But, at the same time, Michelet got up, went into the next
room and left us alone for a moment.
Then he returned and sat back down at the table around
which we had remained, silent and emotional. He turned to
me and said, in the tone of a man reporting the revelations of
an oracle, "Mme. Michelet agrees with you."
And we started to write.

He did not like Blanqui and, in the first line, made him re-
ponsible for the attack and death sentence.
"Our comrades," one of us declared, "would never repudiate
their leader, even if that were the only way they could escape
death."
He pinched his lips, said "Hmmm," and disappeared once
more. But he was not gone long, and when he came back he
said again, "You have women on your side, gentlemen, no
doubt about it; Mme. Michelet understands your objection and
agrees with it. Strike the sentence."

Finally, when it was all done, he wanted to consult his
Egeria once more; we smiled at him, but we all had tears in
our eyes.
He had questioned the heart of the woman who was the
companion of his life and his ideas. That heart had spoken, as
ours spoke, for the salvation and honor of our friends.

Michelet was walking up and down the room. "They won't
dare kill them, I don’t think they will. The weather’s so lovely!
... It's too sunny, blood would leave too ugly a splotch on the
lawn ... no bourgeois family picnics on the grass if they can
smell a corpse nearby. They'll agree with us, you'll see. In any
case, I defy them to shoot on a Sunday!"
The appeal ended with these words, more or less: "God who
watchest over nations."
God! ... That didn’t sit well with our quartet of atheists.
Frowns and silence.
Michelet studied our physiognomies, shrugged his shoulders
and said, "Right. But it looks good."
It was time to take the letter to the papers, and there was a
fight over who would have that honor.
Damn! How smart I was not to join any group, any church,
any conspiracy!
It seemed there were two sects of Blanquism, and each re-
used to admit that the other had a right to save the fighters’
lives.
They would have been done for if we had let one particular
group have its way. This fine bunch did not want to be in-
volved in disarming the execution squad unless it could be the
only one to have the glory of blasting the death sentence.

They finally compromised, fortunately, on peculiar independ-
ents like me, and we made the rounds of the papers.
At the Débats a man somebody told me was Maxime du
Camp shook his head in irritation while listening to us. That
fellow was really hard on the defeated!
The thing was considered good copy and published almost
everywhere, but no one added a single line of sympathy or pity.
People ran to the Parisian deputies, who were extremely hard
to reach and who made vague promises; a few added cowardly
words that had to be choked off in their throats.

Gambetta really gave it to the convicted men and asked the
court to see that they were executed for aiding the enemy!
The bastard! He knew better than anyone else that those
were good people. But good people worried him, they posed a
threat for the future. Who could tell, there might be a dictator-
ship to be fished out of the troubled blood of defeat. It would
And Gambetta's colleagues hesitated, they were under his thumb. Still, they didn't slam the door in our faces. The hor- zon was clouding up, the storm might break the next day, they did not want to be dragging around the few men in their coats that had been nailed up with bullets. That's what I mean, I was gone.

I headed for the nearest police station. There was a row, a nameless mob, leaderless courage. Where was the crowd? Where could I find them? No one knew. The cops had already tried to scratch them off with their swords; they had been nailed up with bullets.

 Shots had really been fired!

XVII: September 3: News of the Battle of Sedan. A few days before the end, we got together and went to the offices of the bourgeois opposition newspapers, where there had been invited to make jokes about their revolutionaries. We were on good terms with the revolutionaries, we had been invited to my article on the fate of the five Parisian deputies.

But on this occasion the majority of the French delegation claimed the right to force open all doors and start with the less liberal offices behind them.

Differences were crushed under such events, and even those who were formerly called bastards were now being sought by the same methods. The best discipline, the most disciplined, the best discipline, the least disciplined. They would be used, as the understanding reserved for people to be watched carefully, after they had snatched away the soldiers' rifles or made them turn their barrels down.

Oh, I was well aware of what we could expect. They tried to push things up with a hand shake or a tip of
Several people recognized me. “Aren’t you at the deputies’ meeting, Vingras?”

“What does it look like? Who needs their opinion or their permission to shout ‘Long live the Republic, down with Napoleon!’”

“Hush, hush! Don’t be seditious!”

“Don’t be seditious? But it’s so much fun!”

“Just be patient. The representatives are going to receive us on the steps of the Assembly building and give us our orders. Until then, keep quiet!”

Always orders to wait for, orders like the Negro’s diamond, kept under the staff’s rear end.

But can all these people around me possibly believe the troops and police will leave them alone if they don’t say anything? They could take out their tongues and put them in their pockets, and the cops would still smash their heads if they and their leaders felt strong enough to get away with it.

Comrades, to shout “Long live the Republic!” is the best way to save your skin. When an uprising has a rallying cry, a flag that has seen fire, it’s halfway to victory. Every time rifles come up against an idea, they tremble in the soldiers’ hands. Troops can see perfectly well that their officers are hesitating before raising their sword and giving the command to massacre.

That’s because the brass feels History’s eyes on them.

**One a.m.** I stopped in the Place de la Concorde to join a group preaching insurrection right out loud.

What had the others done? Had they gone on to the Chamber, had they seen the deputies? I had no idea.

The crowd was breaking apart, crumbling.

The serpent was twisting in the night. Fatigue was chopping it into still-writhing pieces, two or three of them bleeding. Over to one side were a few wounded, courageous men who had attacked alone at the beginning of the evening, when the cops still dared come out and shoot.

The night was cool, peace was descending from a tranquil blue sky.

**September 4, Nine p.m.** For six hours we’ve been citizens of a Republic, a “Republic of peace and concord.” I had attempted to give it the adjective “social,” I had raised my hat; it had been pushed over my eyes and stuffed into my mouth.

“Not yet! Let the sheep wail. Nothing but Republic for a start. The bird makes his nest one straw at a time. *Che vu piano vu sano.* Just remember that the enemy hasn’t left yet, Prussians are watching us.”

I let the sheep wail! But it seemed to me that that sheep had been doing nothing but whining since I came into the world, and I had always been forced to wait for it to finish.

Go to it, lambie-pie! Provided they let me go to it with my tears, too. . . . That’s not so certain.

So we’re citizens of a Republic? Well what do you know?

But when I tried to go into the Hotel de Ville they smashed my feet with rifle butts and, when I identified myself, the commanding officer shouted, “Be especially careful not to let that one in! Do you know what he was saying a little while ago? That we should kick this paper government out the window and proclaim the Revolution!”

Had I said that? It’s quite possible. But certainly not in those terms.

I’m not the sort to climb on a chair and hiss to get the Social Revolution’s attention. Damn, if it had shown its face, I certainly wouldn’t have refused a helpful push to get all those deputies out the window—although I would not have prevented people from spreading mattresses underneath so no one would get his little self hurt too much.

In several places police had been trapped and were being roughed up. A few bourgeois with extremely respectable features, Paturut heads and a very calm voice were suggesting that they be thrown into the Seine. But the workers weren’t holding
on very tight and all you had to do was talk about the cop's wife and children to make them let go.

I helped—without getting too worked up about it—in the liberation of two police officers in flaming new uniforms who, while dusting themselves off and combing their hair, assured me that they had always been republicans and were damned advanced in their opinions. "Maybe even more advanced than you, sir."

Advanced? ... I was not so advanced at the moment. In the disturbance I had lost my hat and my voice shouting "Down with the Empire!"

I had used up my lungs, exhausted my strength. I could no longer speak, I could barely walk. I was as tired on that evening of triumph as on the evening of defeat nineteen years earlier.

Always hoarse and fatigued, always threatened and halted—on the days when the Republic is reborn as on the days when it is slaughtered.

But what did I have to complain about? Weren't the Parisian deputies at the Hotel de Ville ... of course, they didn't get there until after they had almost botched the whole thing.

The biggest coward had been Gambetta. Jules Favre had had to call him, and even then the cheap imitation Danton had not come right away.

Finally, though, they made up their minds, piled into carriages and split up the cabinet posts along the way. The one sitting outside next to the coachman was robbed, they left him nothing but dregs.

During the trip a man tried to attack one of their cabs. He was mobbed.

"Down with the Bonapartist!"

"I'm a waiter in a café," he said. "Two of the people in this carriage owe me for cigars!"

Some people laughed. But in the group were two or three teacher-types who wanted to let him have it, saying that Baptiste was insulting the government.

Baptiste replied, "If they won't pay me for my Cuban specials, at least let them appoint me to some office."

It shall be done, but you'd better run as fast as you can! Almost all the holes have been filled; the spoils were already being distributed when the horse took its first step, and the pace is increasing as greed and ambition gallop along.

The good people are giving a helping hand to all these politi-
cizers who have been waiting since December, '51, for a chance to get back to the trough and resume grasping appointments and fodder.

They bump and grind up the runway formed by the large tables in Saint-Jean Hall, lean out the window and hit the Empire, the helpless Empire, with their arms and their words, like Punch laying it on the unconscious policeman.

And the faithful dog barking in their honor does not suspect, the idiot, that they're already arming themselves against him, that these harangues are nothing but honeyed cakes hiding vile poison, that they're thinking only of how to cut off his paws and smash in his teeth. Today they have him to protect and guard them; tomorrow they'll say he's mad and use that as an excuse for gunning him down.

"No exiles with us!" screamed Gambetta when he heard Pyat's name.

But he himself suggested Rochefort, who had no social past, whose name meant only war against Badinguet and not yet war against Prudhomme.

They had their plan. They intended to annihilate him between them, compromise him if they could, deprive him of his popularity and kick him into the arms of the mob.

Meanwhile, that popularity could be their cloak.

"Rochefort! Rochefort!"

God, they loved him!

The doors of Pélagie prison had been opened to its inmates, and yesterday's prisoners were walking along the boulevards,
their buttonholes flowering red, and Rochefort, the writer for
the Lanterne, at their head.

They passed through cheers, went under the arch.

It was done, Rochefort was their hostage! The Gambettas
and the Ferrys were ready to suffocate him in the tricolor.

September 5 My total assets are twenty sous, today, Sep-

tember 5, 1870, Day II of the Republic.

Ranvier, Oudet, Mallet have thirty sous among them.

We were in front of the Hotel de Ville. Everyone had come
there out of instinct, no plans had been made.

In the rain a few insubordinates like me and a few artisans
like the others were wandering about, looking for one another
and talking of the Social Fatherland, the only possible salvation
for the Classical Fatherland.

We were soaked. Ranvier was especially cold, for he had
holes in his shoes and his feet were freezing in the mud.

And coughing!

Besides, on the evening of the third, a cop’s sword had ripped
his overly ripe trousers. It had done no good to sew up the
hole—the wind still came through. He was laughing... but
that didn’t make him shiver any less.

The Republic clothed him no more than it fed him. The people’s victory meant unemployment; and unemployment meant
hunger—before and after, it was all the same!

How did we eat? I don’t remember! Bread, cheese, a half-
liter, a sausage balanced on our thumbs, standing at the bar.

Some journalistic colleagues and fellow workers walked past
the bar where we were; having already secured a position, they
were running to the café to order a banquet at the expense of
Town Hall or heading for the military tailor to get a dignified
braided coat.

They favored me with a pitying look, nodded at me as the
rich nod to the poor, as a sleek dog nods to a mangy dog. And
shining in their eyes I saw all their joy at seeing me hungry
and in the company of shabby men.

Are we still lost, scorned, invisibly strangled the day after
the proclamation of the Republic, we who, with our daring
words and pens, at the risk of poverty and prison, did the work
for the bourgeois now sitting behind these walls, going, com-
ing, playing the flies to our horses in the cart we’d pulled out
of the mud and washed clean?

I’ve already been called a troublemaker, an inciter of disorder,
because I grabbed the coattails of one of those appointees of the
new regime and asked him what was going on in the store.

I shook him. In the end, I was the one shaken.

“Just because we have a Republic, that’s no reason for every-
one to want to govern!”

That’s not what I want.

XIX September 6—Blanqui  Meeting at ten A.M., rue des

Halles.

A small old man—he might just about reach your knee—lost
in a dressing gown with an overly tall collar, overly long sleeves
and an overly wide back was arranging some papers on the

table.

A mobile head; a gray mask; a large, beak-like nose, broken
right in the middle; a mouth whose furniture had all been
removed except for a small tongue, pink and fidgety as a child’s,
darting back and forth between the gums; the coloring of a

potato.

But, above all that, a large forehead and pupils glowing like
burning coals. It was Blanqui.

I gave my name. He offered his hand. “I’ve been wanting to
meet you for a long time. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’d really
like to get you in a corner somewhere so we could talk a while
... as comrades. A little later, when things are wrapped up here, come see me, okay?"

He slipped me his address, dismissed me with a friendly nod and asked if the men from La Villette had arrived.

As soon as the meeting was over I ran to his house.

He lived in the home of a man exiled after the coup d'état, near which he had hidden after the La Villette affair. When I arrived he had a pencil in his hand and was working on a proclamation, which he read to me.

It was a truce between him and the Government of National Defense signed in the name of the Fatherland.

I raised my eyebrows.

"You think I'm making a mistake?"
"Inside of a month you'll be at one another's throat."
"Then it'll be because that's what they wanted."
"At least put one strong sentence in your peaceful declaration."

"Maybe you're right. . . . What should it be?"

I took a pen and added, "We must sound the call to arms starting today!"

"Fine, a good ending."

But he changed his mind, scratched his head and said, "It's not simple enough."

So this was the phantom of insurrection, the black-gloved orator, the man who had made a hundred thousand men rise in revolt at the Champ-de-Mars, the man whom the Taschereau document had attempted to portray as a traitor.

People said that the black glove hid the effects of leprosy, that his eyes were clouded with bile and blood. . . . On the contrary, his hand was clean and his eyes clear. This shaker of human earth looked like an elementary-school teacher.

And that was his strength.

Tribunes with a savage face, the look of a lion and the neck of a bull appeal to the multitude's heroic or barbaric bestiality.

Blanqui, cool mathematician of revolt and repression, seemed
to hold in his thin fingers a formal bill for the people's suffering, a formal estimate of their rights.

His words did not take flight like great birds with booming wings, did not soar above the public, who often have no desire to think and want only to be put to sleep by the music that all vast tumults make without necessarily causing a great increase in man's stock of ideas.

His sentences were like swords stuck into the ground, quivering and vibrating on their metal stems. He was the one who had said, "The man with a weapon also has bread."

His calm voice dropped cutting words that ploughed a furrow of light in the minds of the poor and a red furrow in the flesh of the bourgeoisie.

He was small and looked puny, seemed to be gasping out his last breath, and that's why that weakling set fire to mobs with his words, that's why they bore him on the bulwark of their shoulders.

Revolutionary power is in the hands of the simple and the weak . . . the people love them like women.

There was something womanly in this Blanqui who, accused of felony by the Revolution's classicists, called as a witness for the defense memories of a home abandoned for struggles and prison, a description of the ghost of his adored wife, who had died of a broken heart but who still seemed to survive seated before him in the solitude of his cell, where he could hear the sea wind crying.

Five O'clock—La Corderie This afternoon the people opened their own sessions.

Old politics must die at the foot of the bed where France in labor lies breathing her last—it can give us neither relief nor salvation.

We have to avoid wallowing in human manure and, in order
not to let the cradle of the Third Republic rot, we must go back to the cradle of the First Revolution.

Let us return to the site of the Oath, the great Tennis Court.

The Tennis Court is, in 1871, located in the very heart of conquered Paris.

Between the Temple and the Château d'Eau, not far from the Hotel de Ville, you see a boxed-in place, very wet, lying among a few rows of buildings. The ground floors are occupied by small businessmen whose children play in the gutters. No carriages pass. The upper floors are filled with poor people.

This empty triangle is called the Place de la Corderie.

It is deserted and sad, like the Versailles road on which the third estate trod through the rain. But from this triangle, as once from the road taken by Mirabeau, might come the signal, might erupt the call, to which the millions will respond.

Look closely at this building whose back is turned to the barracks and whose eyes are looking at the market. It’s the calmest of all. Let’s go in.

Fourth floor; a door you could knock in with your shoulder leading to a large hall as bare as a college classroom.

Show your respect. This is the new Parliament!

The Revolution is sitting on these benches, leaning against these walls, propping its elbows on these lecterns: the Revolution dressed in workers’ clothes! This is where the International Working-Men’s Association holds its meetings and where the Federation of Syndicated Workers’ Chambers keeps its appointments.

This is the equal of all the ancient forums. Through these windows can pass words that will make the multitude rage as it did when it heard the words Danton, disheveled and thundering, hurled through the windows of the Palace of Justice to the people maddened by Robespierre.

The gestures are not so terrible as they were in those days, and Santerre’s drum is not beating in a corner as it once did. Neither is there the mystery of conspiracies requiring men to swear with a blindfold over their eyes and the point of a dagger over their heads.

This is Labor in shirtsleeves, simple and strong, with a blacksmith’s arms; Labor making its tools gleam in the dark and shouting, “You can’t kill me, not me! You can’t kill me, and I’m going to speak!”

And it spoke!

Some men from the International, all the socialists with a name—Tolain among them—came together. And out of a debate that lasted four hours has sprung a new force: the Committee of the Twenty Districts.

Again the section, the area, as in the great days of ’93; the free association of citizens who have sorted themselves out and grouped themselves into piles of arms.

Each district is represented by four delegates the assembly has just named, and I’m among those chosen to be responsible for defending the rights of one area against the Hotel de Ville.

We have spread over the entire city the net of a federation that will be much more awesome than that formed in the Champ-de-Mars during the First Revolution—although that earlier federation was no minor event in human history.

Eighty poor people from eighty tenements are going to speak and act—and strike if they must—in the name of all the streets of Paris, now joined by poverty, now joined for war.

Seven O’clock—Belleville We rushed double-time to Belleville.

We were going to organize a club.

But one of us first had to appeal to a friend who ran a café to get on credit a pitcher and some braised veal, which we attacked like beasts.

The last couple of days we hadn’t shoved much down our gullets, and we’d been hollering a lot, which makes you real hungry.
"Are we having a revolution, Daddy?" asked the wine seller's children, who thought the word meant either a celebration they had to dress up for or a good scrap they had to roll up their sleeves for.

God! It didn't look much like one ... nobody would have guessed something like an empire had just come tumbling down.

Now it was time to get the people together.

"How?"

"I've got an idea," said Oudet.

He had seen the remains of a regiment collapsed in the sun near a barracks. He headed up the street, approached the scattered soldiers, found a bugler, dragged him to a corner and told him, "Stand up and blow for the Revolution!"

And the bugle blew!

**Tatatatata, tatatatata!**

The whole neighborhood came running.

"Keep everybody here while we go look for a place to meet."

"Where?"

"The Folies-Belleville," someone suggested. "It can hold three thousand."

"The Director?"

"Here."

"Citizen, we need your hall."

"Will you pay me for it?"

"No. The poor are asking for credit. But we'll take up a collection. If that's not enough, to hell with you! Would you rather we break down the door and smash the seats?"

The proprietor scratched his skull.

**Tatatatata, tatatatata!**

The bugle was drawing closer. The mob was on the march.

He agreed to our proposal—he had no choice!

*The Proceedings* The bureau had been constituted. Oudet, who lived in the neighborhood, was presiding.

In very few words he thanked his audience and gave the floor to me so I could explain why we had come and in whose name we were speaking.

The hall came to its feet!

I had said what had to be said, apparently.

And the assembly cheered the program of the Commune outlined in the Place de la Corderie notice.

A shot!

"Murder!"

Some men rushed to the platform and shouted that one of their own had just been killed right there, right on the street.

"A policeman dressed like a bourgeois did it! All the crapheads in our precinct have been hiding since the fourth, but now they're back on the offensive! They're going to attack us!"

Panic in the corners; but the vast majority stood: "Long live the Republic!"

And above their heads were shining and waving weapons of all metals and all calibers.

In the light of a gas lamp sparkled a hatchet found no one knew where. In a window a man took from his pocket bombs that resembled Orsini's potatoes.

"Get 'em come!"

No one came. The murderer had fled.

Would he be found? Nobody could tell.

But before the end of the session we all voted to attend the funeral.

I was pushed to the front of the procession on the day of the burial, and some people asked for a few words from citizen Vingtras.

The gravedigger had just leaned on his spade, a deep silence was hanging over the cemetery.

I walked up to say a final farewell to the man struck down in our midst, the man whose coffin was lying next to the Republic's cradle. "Goodbye, Bernard."
Murmurs. I felt someone pull my sleeve.

"His name was not Bernard, it was Lambert," whispered his relatives.

Poor people! I was confused, moved, but this very emotion saved me from ridicule and expanded my voice.

"How much deeper must our respect before the coffins of unknown men fallen without glory, exposed to praise addressed not to their personality, which has remained withdrawn through pain and courage, but to the great family of the People in which they lived and for which they died."

That didn't do a damn bit of good. I had still made the Lambert family sadder than before.

The club wanted to have its delegates seated at the same table with those of the other municipalities. It gave us the order to install ourselves immediately in the mayor's office, and it also gave us five armed men—no less—to assist us if things got hot.

The door was slammed in our face.

The five men wanted to keep us on the staircase if not in the office; they were willing to be killed if need be. They considered us soft, I think, when we did not order them to charge.

"Goddamn it, while we keep them busy one of you can go get reinforcements!" shouted the corporal, twisting his moustaches.

Reinforcements? Could we, who were applauded every evening, find even one company to follow us to the end?

Three or four times it had been decided that we would move on the Hotel de Ville as a body.

Half the hall had raised its hands; threats were heard; we had been afraid of being carried too far.

Too far! Just to the corner, where the band fell apart, leaving three or four of us to go scare the Government.

We took the bus—three sous down the drain—and forlornly bore our request, our ultimatum, down poorly lit corridors; finding a wooden face when we came to Arago's office, an iron face when we became angry. The guards moved around in the darkness on signs from some civilian with a shoulder sash and big boots.

I thought being at the head of a battalion would double my orator's strength, that it would be a good thing for my sentences to be punctuated by the exclamation points of bayonets.

And I became a candidate for an officer's rank, although I'd never been a soldier. I laughed when I saw braid, and I knew that every time I took a step—I was terribly afraid of this—I'd trip on the scabbard of my sword.

I met a few of the quarter's bigwigs at the home of the manufacturer Melzezzard, who had thought I had a face like a bandit but discovered I looked like a sweet child—which made a Maratist, who'd like for all those who shall chop off heads to have a frightening one themselves, grit his teeth, but which reassured the notables and led to my nearly unanimous election.

Honors are expensive! I had to have a kepi with four silver braids: eight francs, not one sou less, and even then I got it from Brunereau, a friend of Pyat, who let me have it at cost.

I wanted to call a halt to my expenses with that, but I had worn-out shoes and after a couple of days I saw that they were injuring the battalion's pride.

I submitted the heels to a committee that met while I waited outside. I was solemnly called in after the proper time.

"Citizen, you have just been voted a pair of boots with double-thick soles. Let this be a sign," added the secretary, "of the esteem in which you are held by the people."

There's jealousy everywhere. Those double-thick soles led to grumbles.

But I simply could not take them off. Besides, they kept me warm, and my feet were quite happy.

Despite all that, people were talking, not the advanced camp,
the camp of good people who knew I had worn away leather and skin in their service, but a cabal organized by the mayor, which made a lot of trouble agitating in favor of toes showing their nails.

"And which might show their teeth," the secretary of the second company said metaphorically when he warned me after the morning review.

"Oh, so that's the way it is. We'll just see!"

A drum roll.

"Men without shoes have only to present themselves tomorrow, barefoot, at headquarters, and the commander himself will lead them to the mayor's office. They shall have their bayonet on their gun and cartridges in their pouch."

They came to the meeting, tootsies in the breeze.
The crowd laughed, wondered, guffawed.

"Forward, march!"
The town hall was in an uproar.
The mayor, an optician by trade, had taken a spyglass and was watching us through it.
He saw the horde of bronzed feet tensing for the attack, some almost white with hope, others completely black with anger.

It didn't take very long!
After we had lined up under the windows, the air was suddenly darkened by shoes fluttering down like rose petals. It was as if we were in Milan during the Italian campaign with the women throwing bouquets on the plumbed caps of our troops—only the smell was different.
But the shoemaker in spite of himself vowed he would be avenged. He wanted at any cost to get rid of me as a battalion leader.
He found a way!

One morning, in a storm heavy enough to drown an army,

my men were sent miles away, outside the walls, supposedly on the orders of the commander, who was to supervise the exercise and would meet them at the parade ground.
I had nothing to do with that stroll and was sitting peacefully at home, listening to the rain.

Suddenly I heard the noise of an uprising under my window. Shouts of "Down with Vingtras!" could be heard. And a few men were slapping their rifles and talking of coming up.

"Don't come up, I'm on the way down!"

They had invaded the Favié hall and there they were, five or six hundred of them, brandishing their fists to point the way to the platform as I passed through them.

But they were decent men and, despite their insults and anger, they neither dirtied nor bruised me with their motions. They even listened to me in the end, after I had figured out the betrayal. Fury diminished, anger was eased... .

But I've had it! I'm turning in my kepi, sword and resignation.

Goodnight, comrades!

XX I quickly ripped off my four pitiful little stripes, faded, pinkish, cruddy... and I was free!

Now I could be the real leader of the battalion. Oh, you must never accept regular commands in the revolutionary army! I thought rank conferred authority—it removes it.
You're nothing but a cipher before the number of companies. You truly become a hero only in combat, when you're the first to leap into danger. Then, since you're in front, the others follow. And for that the baptism of the ballot is useless. All that counts is the baptism of fire.

Yes, now that my cap no longer sported a major's little silver worms, all those whose prisoner I had been, those who
had been transformed into my enemies, came to me with open arms, and I presided over the deliberations of every group without being the president of any. It was great to be a simple soldier with thirty sous and the right to shout "Down with the officers!"

"You'd better watch out for yourself, captain, if you let me in your company."

And the captain laughed, or pretended to, for he was well aware that from then on I was the one who would hold the officers in check and whisper very softly the order for insurrection.

I had gotten some use out of my rank, though, when we commanders had gone as a body to communicate the will of Paris to the Hotel de Ville, to ask that men's despair not be worn to the ground but armed once and for all and sent against the enemy.

One morning I saw the entire Government of National Defense wallow in stupidity and in lies under the clear eye of Blanqui.

In a high-pitched voice and with subdued gestures, he showed them the danger, indicated the remedy, gave them a lecture on political and military strategy.

And Garnier-Pagès, in his stiff collar, Ferry, through his whiskers, Pelletan, from deep in his beard, all looked like pupils whose ignorance had just been exposed before the class and the teacher.

It is true that Gambetta was not there and that Picard did not arrive until the middle of the session.

When Blanqui had finished, Millière took the floor and asked, in the name of the revolutionaries, for delegates to be sent out of Paris "to represent the Proletariat before the armies."

"Hey, Vintgras," said fat Picard, pulling me into a window recess and tapping the button of my coat, "you know I'm not in the least opposed, no, not at all, to you taking your credentials as the slums' plenipotentiary wherever you damn well please! I'd get a real kick out of seeing you go. But the others, over there, just look at them! Aren't my colleagues stupid! They could get rid of you and they're not going to! Myself, I'd sign with my toes if that's what it took to get the reds out. Reds? Reds?" he added, imitating the patrons of dance halls who shout, "A partner? A partner?"

And laughed!

Then, leaning over to speak in my ear and putting his finger under my nose, he said, "But you, you s.o.b., you won't leave. I'll bet a rabbit you don't leave!"

I didn't bet a rabbit ... they're too expensive nowadays. Besides, I'd lose. Those requests for a government visa leave me as much in the dark as he is.

We must not abandon the city in these times of famine, in this freezing weather—because that famine and this cold are preparing the hot fever of insurrection. We must remain where people are dying.

Besides, the provinces, which have never come to help us, will not be more responsive just because some people from Paris pop in one morning and start to form clubs that evening.

But they want to do as in '93!

That's what the true believers think, and the shrewd ones among them realize that once a man has set foot in the stirrups of official functions he can be unhorsed neither by the fists of uprisings nor by the rifle fire of restorations.

"But shit goddamn!" Picard shouted to his colleagues, "Give them their commission, let them go get hung somewhere else, let them slip their heads in the noose! Once their neck is caught, the danger's over, they won't be pushing your little heads under the guillotine blade. They'll ask you to save them after the storm and regularize their mandate as irregulars. It always happens that way."
But that philosophy did not take into account the authoritarian personalities who could not appear to be yielding to the populace, who wanted to play the thundering Jupiter hurling _Quas egos_ before which the raging breakers would fall back, their crests bowed.

They were raging one evening in particular. A group of us people’s officers had gone up in full uniform to ask if anybody gave a damn about the poor.

Ferry and Gambetta had come. And blim blam, in the name of the Faaamaatherlaand, of Duuuuuy . . . Gambetta apostrophized and lectured us.

But we parried coolly and fiercely.

Lefrançais did his part, as did others; we popped the balloon of their declamations.

They no longer knew what to say . . . they threatened us.

“I’m going to have you arrested!” Ferry said to me.

“Go to it!”

They didn’t dare, and there we were watching them retreat pitifully. Gambetta slipped away quietly after a final dexterous feat of eloquence.

Ferry, who had the role of courageous leader that night, remained. He was surrounded, pressed. No one knew how all this would end, nor whether he would sleep in his bed.

A few commanders were whispering in a corner, and their hands could be seen gripping the hilts of their swords.

“Vingtras, are you with us?”

“What’s up?”

“There’re a hundred of us here, we represent a hundred battalions. Out of the hundred there are at most eight with Gambetta and Ferry. What if the ninety-two others said to those eight and those two, ‘You are our prisoners?'”

The idea had merit. Something new would be born inside of an hour.

But our lips and eyes betrayed the plot.

Would they take the offensive, call the guards and have us surrounded and disarmed?

No, they were not even sure of those to whom they had given the duty of defending them!

But something had to be done if they were to meet the danger.

Who would save them?

Two men: Germain Casse, who talked tough but had a foot in their camp, and Vabre, who had always been with them.

They withdrew and came back a little later, disheveled and out of breath.

“To your posts! To your posts!”

Everyone came running.

“To your posts! The enemy has just broken through. The walls have fallen!”

No one thought of the conspiracy, or, if a few did think of it, they could see perfectly well that this maneuver had killed it.

And that’s how, one evening last week, the Hotel de Ville escaped from some resolute commanders who wanted to seize it.

But be patient . . . Nothing was lost because of the delay.

XXI October 30 Oudet and Mallet rushed into my bedroom. They informed me of the massacre, the defeat of Le Bourget.

“Oudet, get a bugler! . . . Mallet, find a hatchet! Drummer, sound the call!”

The street was on fire! The bells and drums had gone wild. Mallet had the hatchet in his hand.

Hundreds of men, beneath the very window at which people had shouted “Down with the commander!” were waiting for Vingtras to tell them why he had ordered the uproar.
“Citizens, I withdraw my resignation and ask to march at your head, right now, to help our brothers being slaughtered without hope of reinforcements over at Le Bourget.”
Movement! Exclamations!
“To Le Bourget! To Le Bourget!”

I clasped the hands of Oudet and Mallet, my brave comrades, who had remained to clear me a path with their courage.
“Why the hatchet?”
“To smash in the cartridge barrel I’m forbidden to use without an order from the mayor and all the sacraments of the general staff, but which I rolled into the streets so you could get some stuffing for your pouches. Knock out the lid!”
“Long live the Republic!”

All present . . . not one failed to answer the call.
The officers came up to me. Something like a council of war formed around my unfrocked kepi.
“We’re going, that’s decided. But first we have to consult our superiors and arrange our entry into the fray ... we must find out what measures have been taken already.”
The men putting this obstacle in our way were old soldiers.

At Clément Thomas’ house.
“The general?”
“You cannot see him.”
“We must!”
“Halt!”

But to hell with orders! The sentries marched on them and crushed them under their stomping anger when we whispered in their ears the sinister news and our resolve.

Clément Thomas came to see what the noise was about.
He grew angry, recognized me, asked questions. “What is it now?”
I shouted what it was, so did the others.

“I’ll have you arrested if you keep talking that way.”
We kept talking that way . . . the arresting officers didn’t show up. But we were upset by his authority and the supposed knowledge of strategy possessed by this general who thirty years ago was just a petty noncommissioned officer.

He hit us with a plan that had just been worked out by the Hotel de Ville and the leaders of the corps, the plan that our irregular expedition would surely cause to fail.
“Forces have been arranged according to the laws of war and must intervene at exactly the right moment, according to standard signals. Crafty surprises have been prepared to crush the enemy and avenge our dead . . . . Do you agree to accept the responsibility for defeat, to expose yourselves to charges of folly, possibly even charges of treachery?”
I bowed my head, frightened, and went back toward Boulevard Puebla, where men were standing around their flag waiting for me.

An officer of the sector had accompanied us. He promised that if reinforcements were sent to Le Bourget, the 191st would be the first to go.

Oh great, just great! We went to bed with tears in our eyes, we folded and stored the flag soaked by rain and stinking of wet wool—the flag that should have been perfumed with gunpowder.

October 31 More news, this time even more horrible! Bazaine has betrayed us.
The Government of National Defense knew this and kept it hidden.
“To the Hotel de Ville!”
In quarter after quarter men had decided to go there together.
They were going!

But, in the Place de la Corderie, I was confiscated by a group of my friends, who said that the companies could move for-
ward without me, whereas I was needed to participate in
deliberations being held in the name of the people.

“We have to decide how the movement should be con-
ducted.”

But there were just seven of us. The celebrities were missing.
Blanqui came, then left again; Vaillant did the same. The most
popular men were drowned in the battalions that had made
up their minds to keep them and would not let them go. Even
I was being called for, men came to take me back.

“Vingtras! Vingtras!”

Oh, those who think that leaders control insurrections are
incredibly naive!

Scattered, dispersed, torn, drowned—those are the words to
describe what men call the general staff in the tumultuous
movement of human waves. At the very most, the head of one
of the leaders might emerge at some moment like the painted
busts of women, carved in the prows of ships, which appear
and disappear at the will of the tempest, at the roll of the
waves.

Nevertheless, we decided, the five or six of us standing in
the street, that it was necessary for the Commune to be pro-
claimed that evening.

“The Commune, got it?”

“Come on, we have to go!” shouted the man given the duty
of bringing me back.

On the way I was snatched from the sergeant and held by
the snatchers, as I had been by him, away from the main body
of the crowd, hoisted on a wine seller’s chair, forced to orate,
charged by a committee already improvised around the billiard
table with drafting a proclamation and with giving my opin-
ion, between stiff drinks, of those whom they were going to
“bring to power.”

An explosion!
Children screamed and ran away

The barroom committee, which was made up of brave men,
said that it was time to show ourselves, and we tried to turn
back those running away as we moved toward the Hotel de
Ville, which we intended to take.

“It’s ours,” Oudet said to me after he returned. “You don’t
want to be anything, do you?”

“No! Let’s go back home and stay with the other obscure
men in the neighborhood.”

I did not dare go on! I would have liked to reach the Hotel
de Ville, maybe even have a combat position and be something
in the insurrection.

Oudet had made me blush at my pretensions, or rather I
lacked the necessary courage. It was with a heavy heart that I
retraced my steps.

But Oudet, whom I respected and who loved me, must have
been right. Let the others have the offices, I was going home!

But first I meant to climb up the staircase in the Place de la
Corderie.

Seven or eight men there were disturbed to learn what I had
heard from Oudet: the new government had already been con-
stituted.

They were making up a list themselves . . . as we had been
doing with our feet on the bar rail.

“But our duty is to serve in the government!” said a young
communist lawyer, draping himself in a blue jacket, ready to
die if need be in the cause of the uprising, but also ready to
get ambition’s gifts as he had its courage. He wore his black
hair the way tribunes wear it in engravings, and he shook it
like Mirabeau while tensing his puny little shoulders.

I waited some time there because, bit by bit, people were
beginning to return. Everyone exchanged Byzantine questions,
complaints and insults on the topic of what their conduct be-
fore the people should be—as if the people were watching us
through the keyhole, eagerly waiting outside to beg us to be
the masters.
All my doubts were erased, I was going back to my Sarmatians!

"You know, at the La Villette district hall there's still some national guard troops who didn't take part in the movement this morning."

"Let's go occupy the La Villette hall!"

I was in wooden shoes, since my boots of honor had begun to hurt my feet. I had found the new footwear in a corner and put it on.

Over my jacket I threw a worn, threadbare Inverness cape, which had been blue before turning green . . . but I had my sword in my belt.

I pulled it out. And, under rain falling from a troubled, sad sky, wallowing through mud puddles, I led some thirty men to the rue de Flandre.

We looked pitiful with our dripping hair and filthy pants. My potato peeler soon displayed spots of rust, my cape's wings were flat and flabby . . . I looked like a chicken that had just escaped from a pot.

"Halt!" The eternal "Halt!" that had been awaiting me at every door since I came into the world.

But the soaked objects following me had arranged themselves in battle formation behind me and my cape, which was beginning to shake itself and stiffen.

"Make way for the People, who hold all power!"

The door opened and let us in. "Now that the Hotel de Ville is in your hands. . . ."

A loud noise in the courtyard packed, with soldiers, bristling with rifles.

"The sash of office! Get the sash!"

Two or three officers ran up to me, clasped me to them and wrapped me up.

"In the name of the Revolution, we name you mayor of the district!" they said, pulling the belt tight. . . . too tight.

They loosened it a little; now it was my head's turn.

"In the name of the Revolution, receive the accolade."

And I received a few loud kisses; kisses from the right people, smelling of onion, even of garlic.

And now, to work!

"To work! But what do I have to do?"

"Make some speeches, of course! Are you planning to stay here without talking to the people, without telling them you'd die for them? . . . After all, you would die for them, wouldn't you?"

"Of course!"

"Okay, tell them. They like to be told. Get up on the table.

. . . Watch out there! Okay, you can go over now."

And I went over.

When I felt that my saliva had run out, I concluded: "Citizens, the time for words has passed."

Now I had to do what men in sashes must do.

"What do they do? Tell me!"

"Hell, I don't know!" muttered my neighbor, who had suddenly been named assistant and was also waiting to be taught his trade.

"It's very simple, you have to sign drafts," said an old man aghast at such ignorance.

"That sounds like a good idea . . . but what do we need drafts for?"

"For carriages, lamps, oil, paper, for anything generally whatsoever, damn it! The way it's always done in revolutions."

Hell! I thought all I'd be asked for was cartridges, for which I would have gladly initialed with both hands, as fast as I could. But the rest . . .

"And how do you intend to get news from the Hotel de Ville, from the section leader? You've got to have buggies.
With your signature we can forcibly requisition some. Their owners will come by to be paid tomorrow.”

Tomorrow! I’m not at all sure where we’ll be tomorrow. Now I’ve not only signed drafts, I’ve even “stolen public funds.” For they will accuse me of stealing if they recapture the advantage. I’m familiar with standard operating procedure the day after an uprising, and I’m betting more than my life. That doesn’t really seem to be in danger. It’s just my honor that is on the green cloth there with those few hundred-sou pieces, taken under the authority of the present commander, whose name is Jacques Vingtras.

Oh crap! The chips are down! Let the wheel stop where it may.

But at least I’m going to try and keep everything serious. I don’t want to spend my time signing drafts for requisitioned hay and receipts for confiscated goods.

But everything was not kept serious—quite the contrary! I heard the screams of all the demons in hell on the stairs. It was Richard, the former mayor, passing through the invaders’ battalion after returning from the Hotel de Ville, where he had gone to get orders from his bosses.

He charged the sash in which I was trussed up.

“Give that back to me! You’re breaking the law! I’ll have you shot tomorrow!”

He grabbed my belly and tried to rip off the tricolor belt that had rolled into a slip knot. That knot slipped and was crushing my navel... my tongue was turning blue.

“Our brothers are being strangled!” shouted a veteran of ’48, although we were in no way related.

The good fellow was made to let go, and then it was his turn to be clasped tight. His eyes were soon rolling back in his head.

Fortunately I had regained my breath: “Citizens, let no one touch a hair on this empty head. Let us all respect the shell of this dried-up coconut.”

Laughter. The cocanout showed some froth. “Torture me if you want. I tell you, you will be punished tomorrow.”

“Nobody’s going to torture you, we’re just going to store you in a closet so you don’t bother us anymore.”

And I had him taken to an enormous closet where he was, word of honor, quite comfortable if he didn’t mind standing up, where he could even take a nap if he felt like stretching out on the middle board and wiggling his tootsies.

The revolution was following its course.

One A.M.

One of the guards asked to speak to the acting mayor in the name of the officially recognized mayor.

“What happened? Did he kill himself? Did he smother in there?”

No! The delegate remained mute.

“Speak up, man, speak up!”

He did not dare, but, leaning his mouth to my ear, he said, “Pardon, excuse me, your honor sir, but it’s just that he’s been jumping up and down for a long time now... you see, is that enough?... You understand? Should I let him go, citizen?”

“Yeah, let him go in the closet,” said Gréléri, the assistant. “In the closet, you understand!”

“You’re hard.”

“My dear friend, if he comes out, half the men will rally to him and kick us out! He’s furious, the bastard, and he knows what to do... Just let him wet his powder.”

Fine, let him wet it!

Less than an hour later a sergeant came in; this one was obstinate. He was nicknamed the scout, because of the hair covering his face. He would willingly have died for “his” commander.

“For him I’d even cut off my beard,” he liked to say with a flame of devotion in his eyes.

He brought news from the closet. “It’s flooded, pardon the expression, sir. But that’s not all.”
"What else?"
He too had trouble getting it out. "The gentleman isn't jumping up and down anymore . . . and he requests . . ."
"What does he request?"
"All right, your honor, he requests permission to come out a minute for . . . something more serious."

"You see, reaction is rearing its head," said Grélier. "One thing a little while ago, something else now."
He turned to face the scout. "And what do the guards say? What do they think about the request?"
"Well, they say it wouldn't be so funny if we held him too . . ."
"Let him go once and for all! Use chlorine in the closet and give him the key to the front door with the key to the john!"

He did not have to be told twice, he was off like a shot.
He scratched himself on the side of one of the doors.
"A Prussian!" shouted a few jokers, who almost made the entire battalion take up arms and aim them at the mayor's skint rear end.

And to think that the next day, if we were defeated, people would scream that I had incited to murder and produced a massacre. Even though up to then the only blood I had spilled was the blood of that particular Prussian.

Defeated! That's how it's beginning to look to me.
The news coming from the Hotel de Ville is black.
It seems that the government has found new strength, that people have shown up to rescue it; a battalion of order has left with Ferry at its head and is marching against the insurrection.
Is this true? . . .
"In any case, on your feet, comrades! We have to get the jump on that little battalion."
"We're hungry! We're thirsty!"
"You can eat and drink in Paris."

But they energetically maintained that they would have more guts if their guts had something to digest.
"Okay! Smash the barrels in the cellar! The herring barrels and the wine barrels . . . every man gets one herring and one glass."

And make your packs! I'm going to take back my sword and abandon my sash. Who wants it?

"No, I won't let you leave!"
And they slyly and treacherously blocked our departure.
The commanders who, for two months, had openly or secretly supported the ex-mayor, who hated me because of my popularity in the club, had grown bolder on learning the bourgeois were returning to the offensive. And their emissaries sowed revolt among the groups that had had the guns and power.

"Now that he has created disorder, he's leaving! Don't let him go. You're the ones who'll be arrested and held responsible. Besides, do you even know where he's taking you, do you know what's waiting? He seized the mayor's building, let him stay in it as its prisoner!"

And when I insisted that we were needed elsewhere, the people of Belleville turned a deaf ear; only a small group of simple, brave men departed, heading for the danger.

Our star was sinking!
The word was that the 139th was advancing to attack us.
"They're shaking the gates," a captain told me.
"Shoot their front lines through those gates! Fire!"
"It would be a slaughter."
"We'll be wiped out to the last man if they think we're afraid. Go tell them you'll shoot if they budge."

They kept their distance, not out of fear, I admit it freely, but because, even though they were not on our side, they shared our sadness; they also bore the scars of patriots on their breasts.
So what! I sent to the Francs-Tireurs post for cartridges.
The lieutenant in command there had been my companion in poverty, had shared the awful days with me.

Of him at least I was certain; he would not refuse us munitions.

Goddamn it, he did! He refused us!

Since getting his brass, my old insubordinate comrade had become part of the established order. He might have been expecting the cross or a regular commission in the army. And if he fought like a lion, it was like a lion tired of fasting in the desert who wanted the pick of the flock and the cheers of the crowd.

Oh! It made me want to smash my head against the wall!

We waited like fatalistic Moslems for the end of the drama, waited in the smell of herring and the odor of blue wine.

That herring! My sash smelled of it. A red flag, which somebody had found God knows where and stuck in front of my desk, also smelled of it. What powder we had, what money was left, everything had taken on the smell of the smashed barrels in the courtyard.

You'd have thought you were on a fish-market street in London instead of in the insurrectionists' citadel in La Villette.

**November 1** That citadel had been gradually emptying. Those who left to get news never came back, either because they had been taken prisoner or because they didn't want to return to the hornet's nest awaiting the wrath of the bourgeois battalions.

And a few of us remained, knowing nothing of what was happening in Paris.

A dispatch arrived. "To the mayor of the XIXth District."

Right here! I was the mayor—since I had the sash. I opened and read: "Order has been restored everywhere. No blood was spilled."

It was time to abandon ship. I was weak from hunger and dying of thirst.

Crushed, tired, asleep on my feet, I went into the restaurant where I had gone for a bite to eat with my colleagues around noon. I found that those who had not appeared all night were still there—either afraid of me or waiting for the end before making up their minds.

The end would undoubtedly be my upcoming arrest. There was even a chance I would be picked up before eating my omelette.

Oh, the poor guys! Each stuck his nose in his plate, pretended not to see me; they tried to shut me off from their table by bringing their chairs closer together.

I appealed to them. "I'm going to be seized as an insurrectionist and a thief. I'll need you to testify for me."

They did not let me finish: "Well... To tell the truth... Hmmmm... Uhhh... You know how it is... After all, nobody made you seize the district hall. Maybe you did save Richard by taking him away from the crowd, but if you hadn't taken his place no one would ever have dreamed of choking him to death. We hear you ordered Louis Noir shot. He says so, too."

They made me want to puke. I inhaled a glass of wine and set out for the Hotel de Ville.

No sign that there had been an uprising the night before: hardly any guards, not a single bullet wound in the skin of the walls. A silent house! An empty square!

"Ten sous worth of black soap, please. Yes, ten sous worth."

And I ran home, and I transformed my bedroom into a bath, and I borrowed cologne from a woman in the next apartment so I could soak my jacket. I put my feet in the water and my head in my hands.

Now I was clean, and, if a bayonet cut me in the street, I could go to the hospital with a white shirt and fresh socks. There was indeed a chance I would be cut. I intended to
return to the mayor’s office. That way I would earn the right to disappear and hide from my pursuers.

But first, a little more cologne, if you please! Does it still smell like herring, Ma’am? ... Goodbye.
“You’re going to be arrested, M. Vingtras!”
“I think you’re right.”
“So stay here!”
“They’d just come here to pick me up.”
She blushed a little. We got along well.
“I’ll hide you in my room,” she said, wrinkling her nose so as not to smell my beard, which was still stinking to high heaven.
“That’s impossible! But if I don’t come back you can send me fresh linen. And cologne ... a lot of cologne! Thanks ahead of time.”

My landlord lent me five francs. Five francs! I had emptied my pockets and put all I had in the hands of last night’s treasurer—even what was mine. With a hundred sous I could wait for events to take their course.

Back in the courtyard; I entered without a sword this time, I entered as if I were going into a prison.
The door closed behind me on orders from the commander, whom I had never seen during the trouble though he showed up now that I was done for.
It was, however, true that he thought I wanted to have him shot, the idiot!
And the brother of Victor Noir himself, the one who had talked to me at the deathbed of his still-warm brother, was now the one speaking against me, questioning and accusing me before guardsmen whom I recognized as being from a battalion commanded by a Bonapartist.
Fortunately, a few people were still with us. Bouteloup and his men, who had been napping with their heads on their packs, woke up at the noise to say, “They will not arrest Jacques Vingtras!”

Louis Noir felt ashamed and did not dare give a final call for help from the dirty joker, who might have been a friend of the house of Auteuil. I was allowed to pass.
Except for that ungrateful wretch and the eaters I had seen that morning, everyone did his duty. And when I entered the room where they had gathered, as if for a council of war, they all greeted me with open arms.
“Get out of here, leave now, you nut! There’s going to be a warrant issued for your arrest, we heard about it from the government cabinet.”
I left, escorted by brave comrades; I left, pretending to be unconcerned and peaceful. A cab was waiting for me at the corner; its driver was one of our men.
He whipped his nag until it bled and sped me away from the mayor’s office which, by some miracle, I had been allowed to leave. Giddap, Nelly!
When we were far away, very far away, he cracked his whip, asked his horse to forgive him, and said, “Goddamn it all! Embrace me!”

XXII

PASSEDOUET, MAYOR of the XIIIth district, hid me for three days.
The third day I took my razor, shaped my beard, cut off my sideburns, kept my mustache and goatee, and left for the house of a friend who was not mixed up in politics and who had offered me comfortable and secure hospitality in a peaceful, clerical neighborhood. There I could defy the police and escape the court-martial.

But did they even want to arrest us?
After a week, fed up with the life of an escapee hiding in a hole, I went back to the Place de la Corderie.
If they really wanted to get us, all they had to do was keep agents there....
That's what they were doing.
So they knew I was back, that others were back as well, men sought for October 31 whom they could easily find and unmask, so poorly were they disguised in a three-days’ stubble and circus glasses.
And yet the government was playing dead and let us hop up and down the Corderie staircase fifty times a day.

That Corderie had become a real forum!
It was arming the Revolution, drafting plans for the coming insurrection—and for the salvation of the Fatherland!... It was the salvation of my honor not long ago.

It was when I had my kepi with four braids. I was on guard at the wall. An officer came up to me. “Don’t you know what people are saying? I heard you were conspiring with the Empire when you campaigned against Jules Simon.”
“People are saying that?”
“Right out loud.”
I abandoned the battalion. I leapt into a cab.

Yes, people were saying that right out loud in cafés; they had shouted it the day before in public meetings.
Germain Casse the creole, was the one spreading the news.
“Maybe I should smash in his face for a start?”
“Just calm down,” said Blanqui, whom I had run to, “and don’t break anything. You’re beginning to be popular.”
Popular? Was he making fun of me?

Calm down! I couldn’t. And, my head on fire, my heart swollen to the bursting point, my throat dry, my eyes out of focus, I dashed from section to section, leaving my cab when it slowed at intersections, running like a madman to the friendly houses belonging to those members of my old committee I was sure of and screaming to them in my hoarse voice, “Help! Help!”

I dragged them with me, I picked up a few more on the way, men who knew about my poverty and courage, and the sun had not set before the Corderie was shaken by my petition for an investigation. The Eighty were called together for the next day, the people’s chambers were all to be in session.

Oh it was long! What a night I had!
Finally dawn came.
Brions, Gaillard and another man were accused along with me. That morning we all went to Police Headquarters and badgered the people there to show us the papers slandering us, the weapons loaded to kill us.
Nothing! We were shown nothing!

The hall was full; all members of the grand jury were present. The officers had just been elected.
I had the floor.

I told everything, from A to Z; how a committee came for me, headed by comrade Passedouet—Passedouet, whom no one suspects, right?
I had been eating the daily special in a bar. I felt a sword in my back. People told me over and over that I, the future historian of the June heroes, had to represent those conquered men against the republicans reviling them, that I had to raise before our enemies the mutilated corpse of social warfare.
I accepted, but I said, “Look, I’m eating the thirty-sou lunch. I’m poor, I don’t have a cent to give to my campaign.”
“A man came and offered to help with the posters,” replied the committee.
“You be the judges,” I concluded.
“But suppose the Empire was paying him!”
What for?... We were not campaigning to win, we knew we would be shamefully outvoted.

Five hundred votes! We couldn’t even be sure we’d get five hundred votes.
We got them. But could that tiny bit have kept Simon from winning?
And that’s why I’m standing before you, accused of being a traitor. But just look at me. Do I look like I’ve sold out?

Do I have to tell you how much suffering I’ve stored up during my lifetime? Am I to count off all the times I wrestled with hunger in order to remain free?

And, after years of that heroism, when all I needed was a little patience to become almost famous, even happy, that’s when you think I destroyed, chained and sold myself!

I’m not the one who should tell you that I’m worth something, but can’t you see that I’ve already had at least ten chances to get rich if I had wanted to?

Oh, I know perfectly well I’m going to be acquitted. But my heart will still carry all the shame of this accusation.

My honor? It’s going to come out of here brighter than ever. But my pride! Who’s going to wash its wounds, who’ll draw out the pus Casse’s finger injected into it?

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 

They did not let me finish.

In every part of the room, hands reached out to me. A few embraced me; two or three men had tears in their eyes.

But it doesn’t make any difference! There’ll always be a few bastards who will one day pick up this filth and mud and throw it on me, after I’ve been disarmed by defeat, exile—or death.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 

XXIII February 23 Well, well, I was wrong when I thought the Hotel de Ville would not dare try to arrest us.

It dared.

October 31 is to be judged by a military court. The officers of a captured army are to pass judgment on free men!

They will go—Lefrançais, Tibaldi, Vermorel, Vésinier, Jacard, Ranvier, maybe a few more they haven’t caught yet—they will go between two hedgerows of loaded rifles with fixed bayonets that will lower to chest level if anyone tries to flee or rebel.

They’ll sit on a bench, narrow as a school bench; they’ll be buried between a table and an old pot-bellied stove, you won’t even see their heads—the heads threatened by the articles of a bloody judicial code.

This time their heads are not really endangered, I know; not even their freedom is in jeopardy. What kind of man would dare find them guilty?

Find them guilty! Because, seeing the ship dashing against the reef, they rushed up to the captain and shouted, “France is sinking! Shoot the alarm guns!”

Find them guilty!! Why not sentence them to be slapped around with Trochu’s hairy hat or run through with Bazaine’s sword?

That’s not all. The sergeant on duty will have a lot to do this week, and the prosecutor of the Republic will be kept busy drawing up indictments.

They’re also going to pass judgment on a piece of paper. Its name is the “Red Poster.” It was stuck on walls when there was no bread and it was raining shells.

What trouble that poster gave us—Vallant, Leverdays, Tridon and me!

The Corderie, in its session of January 5, had named us to serve as interpreters of the common idea.

It was agreed that before ten o’clock the next morning we would draft a proclamation which, if approved by the assembly, would have the honor of being plastered all over Paris the next night.

But first we had to write it.

We had to give the people a style both simple and expansive. They were rising to speak before history in the most frightening of storms, under enemy fire. We had to remember the Fatherland as well as the Revolution.

And in the little place on rue Saint-Jacques where they had
shut themselves up, those four men of letters pulled out their hair over every line written on the blank paper, deathly afraid of slipping into platitudes or bombast.

We were ashamed of ourselves, and every stroke of the clock echoed dolefully inside our skulls.

The job was finally three-quarters done. It was five a.m.

Tridon, ill, who was to die of the disease ravaging his body, suggested we take a nap—with the understanding that later we'd give it all we had.

We both stretched out on an improvised bed, which I left to give him more room—the poor man's throat was shredded, his skin was peeling, and he curled up under the only blanket left to us after our comrades had taken the only other one they were to share.

His flesh was already dying, but his thoughts remained robust and healthy.

When we woke up we heard the cannon roaring in a voice we had not heard before. It was the beginning of the bombardment of Paris.

And our manifesto was sitting there—as cold as we were!

I am unable to express our sadness; we were afraid of being unworthy of our own, and the new shells hissed in our ears like the anger of a disappointed audience.

We had to have a sentence, just one. But it had to vibrate like the soul of Paris; Paris had to have a word so it could take up its position in the future.

We dragged ourselves to the Place de la Corderie without finishing, unconcerned about the danger, even secretly hoping to be killed before reaching our destination.

During a particularly loud explosion, however, Tridon shook himself and, looking at the sky, wrinkling his brow, tested in the frozen air a sentence, a word. . . .

He had found it!

The proclamation, read in solemn silence, was drowned in applause

It ended thus: "Make way for the People! Make way for the Commune!"

That's the proclamation they're going to prosecute. It was not a call to rebellion, however. It was a cry shouted by hearts burning with fever, less a cry of indignation than of despair.

The signatories were arrested—a crowd led by a drummer went to open the doors of Mazas prison for them. And now the Cherche-Midi clerk is calling their names.

They remember that poster at the Hotel de Ville, even though since that time the mud of capitulation and the blood of January 22 have flowed under the bridges of Paris.

But January 22 was mentioned too. They wanted to make it a day of crime.

Who had committed the crime?

Poor Sapia! He had a thirteen-sou cane in his hand when he fell. He was screaming "Charge!" but he had no sword and he had no rifle.

The nine-year-old child who was found dead hadn't fired, had he? And the old man, whose brains had squirited on the candlestick, was carrying in his pocket not a bomb but a prayer book.

January 22: How many innocent had been massacred!

Those unable to run fast enough had collapsed behind piles of sand or lain flat behind overturned street lamps, had crouched in mud rising to their lips.

Occasionally one of those crouching men would detach himself from the bleeding cluster and crawl on his belly toward a safer spot—until he abruptly stopped and crawled no more. But you could see on his side a scarlet stain, like the stain you see around the bung hole of a wine barrel.

Among those the police will lead forward tomorrow are some who came only to carry away the wounded or to cover with their handkerchief the horrible face of the dead.
And the awkward brutes in power do not understand that it is better to imitate the latter and throw over those dark days the veil of forgetfulness.

March 8. October 31 has been judged.
A court-martial acquitted most of those who, under the treaty concluded during that sinister night, should never have been arrested or prosecuted.

The sword of the judges of the Council of War nailed the perjurers of the Hotel de Ville to the pillory of history.
The only ones still in trouble are Goupil, myself and a few others, brought to the dock for acts not covered by the agreement.

The "Red Poster" also emerged victorious from the debates. There were two sessions at the Cherche-Midi, two crops of accused persons, two similar verdicts of absolution.
The men of the Government of Defense have so far got nothing out of it but fleas in their ears.

Ferry displayed his rage, however, by reviling the defeated and swearing on his honor that he had recognized me perfectly—yes, me, Vingtras—on the night of October 31, at the Hotel de Ville; that I had been among those bawling about sending him to Mazas prison.

In order to throw the lie in his teeth, I had to go up and declare:

(1) That since I had tasted Mazas, I would rather see a comrade guillotined than see an enemy sent there;
(2) That I thought he, Ferry, should be spanked rather than martyred;
(3) That it had, to my great regret, been impossible for me to slander the government on its ivory chair. I was being prosecuted for being at La Villette at that precise time and for locking up old Richard, the lawful mayor, before making an entire population sick by feeding it on herrings "intended for the wounded."

There was no choice but to yield to the evidence, but Ferry just had to see that I was given a sermon; and if the president of the Council of War has any pull at all with the government, I know where I stand—they're going to take care of me.

March 11. At the Cherche-Midi. "You, Vingtras, you'll get at least six months."
I may get six months, that's possible; but you can bet your ass I'll fix things so I don't serve them!

To be taken and jailed at this time might mean immediate exile, might even mean being kidnapped one night when there's a revolt in the city and given a hush-hush ticket to Cayenne—unless I was to be killed by a piston shot from a municipal employee tired after a long day of uprisings, or executed legally against a wall.

 Shootings are in the wind, and in the intoxication of triumph, during the fury of a doubtful struggle, prisoners better watch out!

It would be hard to disappear like that.

The door to those summary slaughters is still only cracked; but, forgetting annihilation for the moment, imprisonment would still be too hard to bear.

Who knows whether noises from the city would reach me, whether I would be able to see the flashes of lightning through the bars of my cell? So I would know nothing? I would hear nothing? While the fate of our men was being decided, while they were betting their lives and being decimated?

Let anybody who feels like it play Silvio Pellico; I intend to try and slip through their fingers.

It will not be difficult.
We're allowed to come and go. It was on our own initiative that we offered ourselves for conviction. Consequently we're guarded loosely.

On my left is an old career sergeant, straight as an oak, with
terrible mustaches that have almost blinded me two or three times; he’s a head taller than I am.

But he watches me—from above—without anger, almost as a friend, although he furiously chews his short utterances as if he were gnawing on pebbles.

The Council has retired to deliberate.

In the corners people are jabbering and discussing. I may have only a few minutes of freedom left now; I’m going to use them to jabber and discuss like the others . . . and to look and see if the door is open.

Pow! Right in the eye! My neighbor’s mustache blinding me for the fourth time. Only during this attack I understood what he’s been muttering in my ear for at least fifteen minutes: “Goddamn it, young man, get the hell out of here!”

“Thanks, old fellow, I’ll give it a try.”

I had passed through the door, I was in the street. Just like at La Villette, I walked away nonchalantly, acting like a man out for a stroll, before running like blazes after turning the first corner.

And I found asylum very soon, near the prison where I was to have been taken.

The next day, a friend I had told my plan to brought me news of the verdict. I got six months, right on the nose—and I didn’t give a damn.

But the old nags of the state of siege, with one stroke of the pen, had crossed out six socialist papers, among them the Cri du Peuple, then in its eighteenth issue and walking very well, the little chipper.

Ferry had had his vengeance. I was free, but my newspaper was dead.

He did not take all his vengeance out on me, unfortunately. The Council of War’s clemency was a fraud. October 31 was hit with capital punishment—Blanqui and Floureens were sentenced to death.

So what! They couldn’t be found anyway.

In my retreat I saw no one and heard nothing. But I could feel the storm brewing nonetheless, I could see the horizon darkening. Let the people be made to lose patience—and let the first thunderbolt explode!

XXIV March 18 “Knock, knock!”

“Who’s there?”

It was one of the three friends who knew where I was hiding; he was out of breath and pale.

“What’s up?”

“A regiment of the line has gone over to the people.”

“There’s fighting?”

“No, but Paris belongs to the Central Committee. Two generals had their brains blown out this morning by government rifles.”


“One had ordered his men to fire on the crowd. His soldiers joined the federals, dragged him off and slaughtered him. A sergeant in an infantry uniform fired the first shot. The other was Clément Thomas, he’d come to spy, one of the June veterans recognized him. Up against the wall! . . . Their bodies are riddled with holes and lying in a garden off rue des Rosiers, over there, in Montmartre.”

He fell silent.

Well! It’s the Revolution!

So here it is, the moment hoped for and awaited since the first time my father was cruel to me, since the first time my teacher slapped me, since the first day I spent without bread, since the first night I spent without lodging—vengeance for school, poverty and December!

I shivered nonetheless. I would have preferred not to have
spots of blood on our hands at the first dawning of our victory.
Maybe a vision of blocked retreat, inevitable slaughter, black
peril, was also chilling the marrow of my bones. I was not so
much afraid of being included in the hecatomb as I was frozen
by the idea that I might one day have to command it.

"Your latest news is how old?"
"One hour."
"And you're sure there was no fighting, nothing new or
tragic happened after the shooting?"

"Nothing."
How peaceful the streets were!
No sign that something had changed under the sun, that
some Bruteses earning thirty sous apiece had crossed the Rubi-
con in chase of a midget Caesar.
What had happened to him, by the way, the old Foutriquet?
Where was Thiers?
No one could say.
Some thought he was hiding and preparing to flee; others,
that he was flitting about someplace, giving orders so the bour-
geois forces could reassemble and crush the uprising.

The square in front of the Hotel de Ville was deserted; I had
thought we'd find it quivering and crammed with crowds, or
bristling with cannon aimed at us.
It was, on the contrary, mute and empty; there were no
plucky lads inside yet—not even the foolish fellow who, with
the daring of his convictions, makes the entire Forum catch
fire, as an entire chandelier lights up when the flame touches
the key candle.

The throng was on the edges in a curiosity cordon, not in a
battle circle.
Opinions all over the place!
"The courtyards are filled with artillery, the gunners are
waiting, they're ready to light the fuses. . . . Remember Janu-
ary 22! If we take one step forward, bang! Doors and windows
open, we're blown to kingdom come!"
That's what was being said around the already dusky square
in which I seemed to see the bloody silhouettes of two generals
coming to attention.

But a citizen ran up: "Rue du Temple has been occupied
by Ranvier. . . . Brunel has massed his battalion in rue de
Rivoli."
Ranvier and Brunel over there! I was off!
"Better run along the walls! If there's shooting, you're in
less danger."
"Hell no! If they've got machine guns in the yard and Bre-
ton mobles behind the windows, we might as well find out
about it!"
And a few of us broke the cordon; we took three beads away
from the hesitation rosary. Other beads followed us, left the
string and rolled away.

They had been right, I saw Brunel in full uniform, but he
was already at the door with his men.
I ran to him.
He explained the situation to me.

"We're masters of the field. Even if they regroup someplace
we don't know about and attack us, we can hold out long
enough for the Central Committee to come with reinforce-
ments. . . . Ranvier is in fact over there, as you heard. We
are assured that Duval has gone with the men of the Vih and
XIIIth to Police Headquarters; if this is not true, we should
send him orders to march. . . . Damn, we've got to keep rue
du Temple guarded all night long as if we were at war. I've
been a soldier, and I prefer the discipline of uprisings to that
of barracks. . . . So you go find Ranvier, you're his best friend,
talk to him like a comrade, let him know what I said. I can't
do it myself, it would look like I wanted to play commanding officer."
"Right!"

There he was, the pale man, commanding soldiers erecting a barricade.
"Okay, it's done, look!"
A black line of bayonets, a whole file of silent men! It was Duval's army, silent as the armies of Hannibal or Napoleon passing unseen across the Alps or Saint-Gothard pass.
The people were on their guard—the night was ours.

But the next day, at sunup, they would need a real blast of the trumpet.
And I went to wake up a buddy. "The Cri du Peuple is going back on the streets... Go let Marcel know, see how much paper the printers have... Quick, a pen! I have to write my first article."
And I sat at a desk.
But no! I wrote nothing at all.
My blood was churning too furiously in my veins, thought was burning the words out of my brain; my sentences seemed to me either too declamatory or, in their simplicity, unworthy of the great drama on which the curtain had just risen, the curtain which, like a real theatre curtain, had two holes in it—holes made by the two bullets that had apparently gotten the two executed men right between the eyes.

When my arteries had cooled off, when I had opened the window, leaned on the sill and turned my eyes to the city, its sleep and calm frightened me!
Was it possible that the city did not agree with the revolt? Could the shooting of the generals have passed through the two human targets to strike the heart of that part of Paris not on the barricades? Could the insurrection be nothing but the work of a few leaders and a few daring battalions?

Why was there no quiver, no sound of feet, no rustle of weapons?
What if I went down and returned to the rebels, to Duval's black flock, to Ranvier's gray barricade?

Come on! I, the defender of the humble, still worry like a frocked pedant encountering a name he doesn't know.
And I closed my window on the impenetrable city that looked dead, although I heard it had just been reborn! I closed my window and blocked off my mind at the same time—ideas came no more.
On a sofa showing its horsehair innards I spent the hours I should have spent standing up or, my hand on my weapon, lying on a camp bed, rolled up with my head on my knees.
In the morning I ran to see those I knew best.
They also had waited—stupefied by the thunderbolt from Montmartre.
Yet among these comrades were men as brave as lions. That reassured me and helped put me on better terms with my troubled conscience.
It was not before peril that my friends and I had recoiled, it was before a half-victory won without us, a victory we might lose by entering the lines too late.
I headed for the Hotel de Ville. "Where is the Central Committee meeting?"
"Upstairs. And to the right."

On the way I stepped over sleeping men who had stretched out on the staircase like exhausted animals. They reminded me of the cows who fell in the streets during the siege, their big red bodies lit by the moon.
Since dawn the day before, these men had done their duty and worked like slaves, had taken their bayonets and prodded the chests of the horses mounted by Vinoy's fat officers, before spending the evening cutting bread and distributing foodstuffs, and some of them had sprinkled their meal and their fatigue
with a little wine to buck them up. They were exhausted and sleepy.

But not a single one would be unable to leap to his rifle, aim and fire, if Moreau, or Durand, or Lambert—those were the names of their generals—began to shout that Ferry was returning with an Ibos and a 106th, as on October 31.

"To your weapons!"

All would have left the tin cup to take up the cartridge pouch and stick something, this time not their thirteen-sou knife into pickled pork but the one-tined fork at the end of their gun into bourgeois tripe.

But, for the present, no smell of anger, not even a whiff of enthusiasm!

They looked like a regiment given permission to snooze on the porch of an official building because of a lack of beds, a regiment told to get soup, fire and candles the best way it could.

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XXV Where is the Central Committee?

The Committee? ... it's spread here and there in this room. One member is writing, another's sleeping; that one is chatting, half-seated on a table; this one, while telling a funny story and making his neighbors laugh, is patching up a revolver with a split barrel.

I didn't know a single one. Someone told me their names; I'd never heard of them. They were the delegates of National Guard battalions, popular only in their own neighborhoods. Their success as men of words and men of action had been achieved in the assemblies, often stormy, from which emerged the federal organization. I had never attended those meetings because I'd been forced to hide before and after my conviction.

There were six or seven of them, no more, in this great hall where, not so very long ago, the Empire, in gilded uniforms and evening gowns, liked to dance.

Today six big-footed boys with wool-braided kepis, dressed in overcoats or fatigue jackets, sporting neither epaulet nor tassel, were, under that ceiling decorated with fleurs-de-lis, the Government.

They barely noticed that a stranger had come in. It was only after five minutes of wandering about that I decided to go up to the pistol repairer, who had stopped laughing and was saying in a firm voice to a newcomer, "Oh no, they want to steal the Revolution again! I'd rather sit on an exploding ammunition dump than sign! ... I'm not signing!"

He saw me and brusquely asked, "I suppose the district mayors sent you, too?"

"I'm the editor-in-chief of the Cri du Peuple."

"And you didn't say anything! And you were just sitting there like a nobody!"

I was in fact a nobody; I'd been neither with the riflemen the previous morning nor on the barricades the previous night.

I admitted to him that I was hesitant, that I felt defensive.

"I understand," he said, "our obscurity makes us suspect! But behind us are a half-million obscure men—all armed—and they will follow us!"

"Are you sure of that?" resumed the speaker who'd been abandoned for me, Bonvalet, mayor of District III, a little butterball who seemed very agitated and was raising the tone of his voice like a parliamentarian posing conditions or transmitting a challenge. "Are you sure the populace will follow you as you say? We have come to propose to you, we, the League for the Rights of Paris, that you lend us your power (notice I say 'lend') so we can have time to see what happens."

"My buddies can do what they like. I'm going back to my
district to billet myself in your grubby little office and keep you from coming in. . . . That's that!"

"Without us you will be nothing."
"And you, just what are you? You don't seriously think the whole pile of deputys and mayors weighs one ounce today? . . . They would weigh an awful lot if they had put themselves at the head of the movement. They would have the power, and it would be all over for us! Screw the socialists to the wall! If the City's elected officials had come into the party, poof! Bye-bye Commune!"

Then, beginning to laugh, he said, "My dear sir, go tell your bosses that we are here at the will of the common people and that we will leave only when machine guns blow us out."
"That's your last word?"
"You can consult the others if you feel like it. But all I'm doing is repeating what we said that night . . . all together!"

At that moment a group of unarmed men came in; a few yawning, completely disheveled; others waving official papers, their eyes aflame, tapping the sheets, comparing pages.
It was the nucleus of the Committee; they had had news and decided on a response to the deputies.

"Peace or war?" asked Bonvalet.
"That's up to you. Peace if you're not stubborn and proud, if the representatives of the people let us ask the people what they want. We agree to follow in the footsteps of your tradition, but don't horse around, don't cheat and don't betray! You look like that's all you do. And now, my friend, leave us alone; we've got to empty our pockets. We need a million for our 300,000 federalis. I've got ten francs."

"Okay, there's no way out, we've got to break into the coffers."
"So we'll be accused of pillaging and theft!"

Frightened exclamations, obvious reluctance, the fear of poor men, trembling of black hands that up to now have touched nothing but money they earned, on payday; hands unwilling to touch piles of banknotes, heaps of gold kept under lock and key.

"But we have to pay the national guard, they need their thirty sou. What would the women say? If the wives are set against us, the movement's done for, the Revolution's over!"
"That's right!"
And the worst part, the part even more to be feared, was that undisciplined men would form bands to take the bread they needed and more wine than they needed. They would break down any door frustrating their appetite or their thirst until their anger had been worn out . . . and three hundred bastards or nitwits would make the communards be taken for three hundred thousand roughts!
"But those stupid coffers might not even hold enough for two days' wages."
"Even if there were only enough for twenty-four hours, we'd still have to buy as much time as we could. Everything will be on our heads . . . and those heads are so loosely attached to our shoulders! As for me, I'm willing to push in the first crow-bar. What do you say, Varlin?"
"Let's go get the tools."
The abyss has been definitively opened, as if by a cemetery spade. Those smashed locks engage the Committee as fully as the executed generals. The entire race of those with four sous, the "good people" of all classes and all countries, are going to hurl curses, bombs and soldiers at this hotbed of thieves.

I met Ferré. "You know what they decided to do?"
"Yeah! And you think they're making progress. . . . They had the gall to draw up an official report disclaiming responsibility for the execution of Lecomte and Thomas! Already the people are disavowed—and you printed the disavowal in your
rag! In the same rag that called for Chanzy’s release. Keep up the good work, you’re doing just great!” he added bitterly.

“You think I’m a traitor?”

“No! Betrayals find their own punishment, weaknesses find excuses. I’d rather have criminals than weaklings. . . . The garden at the Hotel de Ville is at least as large as the one in rue des Rosiers. . . . They’d better watch out!”

XXVI  
The *Cri du Peuple* is back on the streets.  
“Get the *Cri du Peuple* by Jacques Vingtras!”

It is two P.M., and already eighty thousand sheets have flown from the printer to this square and throughout the city.

“Get the *Cri du Peuple* by Jacques Vingtras!”

That’s all you hear, and the newsboys can’t find enough copies.

“You want my last one, citizen? . . . For you, just two sous,” he said with a laugh. “It’s worth it.”

“Let’s see.”

March 26  “What a day!

“This clear, warm sun gilding the mouth of the cannon, this smell of bouquets, the ripple of the flags, the quiet sound of a revolution passing by, as peaceful and lovely as a blue river; these thrills, these lights, these brass fanfares, these bronze reflections, these flaming hopes, this perfume of honor, all intoxicating the victorious republican army with pride and joy.

“Oh great Paris!

“Cowards that we were, we were already talking of leaving you and going far away from your streets, which we considered dead.

“Forgive us! Fatherland of honor, city of salvation, bivouac of the Revolution!

“No matter what happens, even if we are to be conquered once more, even if we die tomorrow, our generation will have been consoled. We have been compensated for twenty years of defeat and anguish!

“Trumpets! Blow into the wind! Drums! Beat in the fields!

“Embrace me, comrade, gray-haired like me. And you, youngster, playing ball behind the barricade, come let me embrace you, too.

“March 17 saved it for you, kid! You might have been like us, you could have grown up in fog, wallowed in filth, groveled in blood, died of shame, felt the unmentionable agony of dishonor.

“That’s over and done with!

“We have bled and wept for you. You shall harvest our heritage.

“Son of despairing men, you shall be free!”

I got happiness to my heart’s content. A couple of federals tried to read over my shoulder, and they were pleased. “Say what you like, that damn Vingtras can write! Don’t you think so, citizen?”

I was completely intoxicated, lost in a multitude pouring into my ears what it thought of me.

When someone hit the paper and said, “Isn’t that great! Look, just read that!” my reserve made the ardent fans consider me lukewarm, frown at me in anger, and slap me in the side . . . but those slaps breaking my ribs were also patching up my heart.

I felt it was no longer mine, that heart flayed by so many ugly wounds. I felt that the very soul of the mob was now filling and expanding my chest.

Oh, I need death to come for me, I need a bullet to kill me in this bloom of resurrection!

Today I would die avenged . . . and who knows what the struggle will make of me tomorrow?

Formerly my obscurity cloaked in darkness my unknown
weakness; now the people watch me through the lines which, like the veins of my thought, crisscross the sheet of gray paper. If my veins are poor, if my blood is weak, it would be better for me if I were still fighting wretched poverty, still eating four-sou meals, wearing cardboard collars, suffering innumerable humiliations!

At least it gave me bitter joy to feel that I was the strongest in the country of distress. I didn’t have to display much bravery; after all, I had learned some Latin, I was the great man of black beggarland.

But right now, in this time of escape, it’s as if I stood completely naked before a half-million brave people who have taken up arms in order to be free and see that no one starves to death . . . despite work or lack of work.

You starved, Vingtras, and you were almost unemployed for fifteen years. Those were hard times, but that’s when you should have thought about a remedy for famine and mulled over fresh articles for a new code of human justice.

Do you have anything to offer? Search deep in your horrid youth!

Say something, yesterday’s beggar.

I can answer only by showing blue-circled wrists and a tongue swollen from being cut by the scissors of imperial censorship.

Reflect! Study!

When?

Once the Empire fell, the Prussians came: the Prussians, Trochu, Favre, Chaudey, October 31, January 22! I had all I could do to keep from dying of cold and inanition, to hold my sights on the Government of National Defense while holding my guard up against the enemy. Always in the breach, on the alert, on a march!

It’s damned hard to weigh social theories when some of those iron hailstones are falling on one side of the scales! Just try if you don’t believe me.

XXVII Where are the other comrades? Who’s in the important offices?

Not a single well-known name. It’s so-and-so or somebody else, picked by accident from the Central Committee. No one had time to choose during the frenzy of combat. The main thing was to erect the proletarian flag there where the bourgeois flag had been waving . . . the lowliest cabin boy could do that as well as the captain.

"Who’s in Interior? Do you know?"

"I haven’t got the slightest idea!" said one of the leaders.

"Go over and see, Vingtras; stay there if nobody’s doing it, help the comrades if they’re in a jam."

"Place Beauvau, that’s the Ministry of the Interior, isn’t it?"

I wasn’t sure. But it seemed to me that that was where we’d gone the day after September 4 to see Laurier about someone whose name I can’t remember arrested by the new Republic for some offense I can’t recall.

A laundry manager had the “portfolio” at Interior: Grélier, a good boy I had met on the heights of Belleville, the one who temporarily made himself my assistant the night of October 31 at the La Villette district hall.

He was signing orders crammed with barbarisms, but also crammed with revolutionary intent; since arriving, he had organized a frightening insurrection against grammar.

His style, his doubled consonants, his contempt for participles and their concubinage, his pen strokes in the tail of plurals had gotten him the equivalent of a regiment and a big gun.

All the employees who had not run to Versailles, from the office head in a threadbare coat to the office boy in luxurious livery, were afraid of the man who shot down orthography without even thinking about it, who put Noël and Chapsal up
against the wall. He might have—who could tell—the same contempt for human life.

He embraced me when I came in. “Fortunately, old friend, Vaillant’s coming,” he told me. “I’ve had it up to here! Being a minister’s a pain in the ass! Aren’t you one anywhere?”

“Oh, no!”

I was about to leave when, through a door which had just opened, I saw the face of a guy from Figaro, Richebourg, who had been an administrative secretary when I was a chronicler and who, after getting his figures to come out right, used to erect outlines for novels that he counted on selling someday for three sous a line.

He’s been sent by Villemeasant to ask if we would please let the paper start printing again.

I don’t have that much influence, my boy!

The anonymous power that has seized Paris and is drafting proclamations and decrees does not obey M. Vingtras, journalist, and partisan of the most extreme freedom of speech. Of course, my opinion is that, even in the hullabaloo of artillery, even smack dab in the middle of an uprising, printers’ spots should be allowed to hop wherever they choose, and I would like for Figaro, which left me free for so long, to be free as well.

But the laundry manager stood up. “Figaro free? Come on! All it did was ridicule and dirty the socialists and republicans when they couldn’t defend themselves. It’s always stood for spies and cavalry, for the arrest and destruction of the very ones who just made the Revolution.”

The Bellevillian was agitated and lost his temper. “Hey! I remember when Magnard wrote that if the government wanted peace it should pick fifty workers or Bohemians from among the troublemakers and send them to Cayenne as galley slaves. . . . If I thought that way, if I were the same kind of bastard, I’d have Villemeasant, him, you, the whole group stuck in Mazas prison! You used to plead for the arrest of our men and the murder of our papers. All we’re doing is carrying out half your own plans . . . and you’re complaining! Get the hell out of here, get out quick! Somebody else might not be so kind. Use your head, beat it!”

The Figaroer disappeared. I attempted to defend my ideas.

“You, Vingtras, cool it! These federas can hear you, they might get suspicious and do something. The newspaper that treated them as prison fodder has the right to get back on the streets and insult them again? Do you realize what you’re saying? A sergeant, a company, without asking us for orders and brushing aside our resistance, would just go grab the editors and shoot them down as fast as they could pull the trigger. Would you prefer that?”

He was becoming violent, and so were those around him.

The guard, whose bayonet could be seen gleaming through the window, had stopped to listen, and when the “minister” had finished, I saw his weapon move and stand in profile against the sun-drenched wall. The silent man was aiming at and shoot them down as fast as they could pull the trigger. which would insult the poor.

“And Public Education? Who’s there, do you know?”

“Yeah, big Rouiller.”

Rouiller was a strong fellow, forty years old, with a vigorous build and a face apparently speckled with cheap wine. He swayed when he walked, wore full trousers, kept his hat over his ear and poked his snout up. He looked like he could barely keep from waving his arms and legs to clear the way for the poor coming behind him. You expected to see him carrying the cane of Duty’s companion or the baton of a parade leader, a fidgety, dancing baton leading a battalion of irregulars.

He was a shoemaker and a revolutionary. “I put soles on shoes and souls on barricades.”
He was hardly stronger in orthography than his colleague in Interior. But the cobbler was better informed about history and economics than all the college graduates who had held the portfolio before him combined—he had touched that portfolio two days earlier with the frown of a man who knows more about a cow's hide than about morocco.

While waxing his rawhide thread or sending his knife for a stroll up a goat's back, he had also followed the thread of great ideas and carved out a republic for himself among the republics of thinkers.

And, when speaking in public, he could polish and shine his sentences like a fine leather shoe, mold his banter into a sharp boot point, drive home his arguments as he drove nails through heels. His orator's bag contained both fantasy and solid truth, just as his serge "outfit" carried slippers for a marquis and clogs for a mason.

A tribune of the barrooms, known for his horseplay and his anger, a maniac for contradiction, eloquent on the bar rail and in clubs, always ready to wet his whistle, defending all freedoms—that to get drunk like any other!

"There's not but two questions: number one—the interest of cap'tal."

He gave the word only two syllables. He bit off the i with the glee of a man chopping his adversary's points to shreds.

"Number two—autonomy! You must know that, Vingtras, you've been to school. It comes from the Greek, that's what the college men say! . . . They know where it comes from but they don't know where it goes."

And he laughed loud and blew the foam off his drink.

"Give me a little explanation of what autonomy means to you," he said after wiping his beard.

And everyone waited for my answer.

He broke the silence by repeating, "I'm for all kinds of autonomy—of the districts, of the streets, of the houses. . . ."

"And of the cellars?"

"Oh, that goes without saying!"

I was curious to see him at work, and I set out for rue Saint-Dominique.

"Do you want the Grand Master?" said a bailiff with a silver chain who spied me wandering through the halls.

The Grand Master! Was he making fun of me?

Nevertheless, I bowed as if I were somebody.

He led me up the staircase.

A smell of tobacco, shouts.

"But I tell you I never play partners! I should be the slave of a man I'm jointly responsible with? No, no! Everyone for himself . . . autonomy."

The sound of a combination shot.

"Your partner would have made that!"

"Yeah, and I would have had to be grateful to him. Gratitude? I'd rather be autonomous, my friend."

"And besides, whose interest would it be in? Cap'tal's," I said as I came in.

They tapped me in the belly and filled the little glasses with rum.

"You must like this rum; it smells like an old vintage!"

"You'd rather nurse at your desk, huh? Ink sucker! What are you doing here anyway? Planning to kick our asses out, maybe?"

He tossed off another swig and said, "It doesn't make a damn bit of difference to me! No matter what, you can't change the fact that a dumb auvergnat clod came in first, just like a Sorbonne graduate, and every pissant in the office saluted him. We brought bad pronunciation into the Conservatory of the French Language and kicked tradition right in the ass!"

"So tell me, Rouiller, who appointed you?"

"My God, you mean you think I get orders and follow
them! . . . I was delivering some shoes in the neighborhood, I saw the sign, I had a bright idea and came in. The chair was empty, I sat in it, and I’m still here! . . . Hey, over there, the man in the chair, you, would you mind terribly going to get us some pork: a foot for me and a jowl for Theuliére? . . . We’ll eat here. Come on, Vingras, you’re going to eat with us, pay for your share.”

He held out a kepi and began to take up a collection for lunch. “We’ve already spent the trifle the Committee gave us: five francs a head. Now we have to cough up ourselves.”

We spread lunch in the minister’s private office where, since there were five or six of us and we’d already had some drink to honor the pig, we heatedly discussed events.

Would we succeed, would we not succeed?

“What difference does it make?” grumbled Rouiller. “You’re in a revolution, you stay . . . until things change! All we can do is hope we have time to show what we wanted if we can’t actually do what we want.”

Then he turned to me and said, almost seriously, “You may think all we’ve done is shoot pool and guzzle booze since we got here. You’re wrong, my friend! We tried to scrape up a program. There’s what came out of me . . . Take it!”

He drew from his pocket several papers covered with ink-spots and smelling of glue, which he gave to me. “Could you read it? It’s dripping mistakes, isn’t it? But I still want to hear what you think about it.”

What I think about it! I think, in all conscience, that this “generally anywhere whatsoever” autonominarian with the comic mug, that this barroom orator has a clearer intelligence, a more elevated spirit, than the learned, venerable yellow-skins I’ve seen growing pale over old books while searching libraries for the laws of riches and the reasons for poverty.

He knows more than they do, more than I do! In the wrinkled, dirty pages he gave me is an entire plan of education whose wisdom overturns all the catechisms of Academies and Grand Councils.

Rouiller followed me with his eyes. “Have you seen the passage where I ask that every kid get his own beer mug at the age of fifteen? Okay, my friend, you want me to tell you about it? . . . I was able to make a few ideas for myself and line them up in a row only because I’ve always earned enough to drink my quart and have my coffee with a little drop of comfort in it. People say I’m wrong to get potted. But God-damn it, it’s just when I’m boozing it up that my thoughts start to go, it’s just when my eyes are aflame that I begin to see! Believe me, it’s not concern for virtue that makes people advise the poor not to lap it up; it’s because alcohol might clear up their brains a little, it might grease their muscles and warm their hearts. You like what I did? . . . Yeah? . . . I wrote it with the sweat of my drinking bouts!”

XXVIII The list of the Commune has just come out, in twenty sections, from the twenty quarters of Paris. I am one of those elected in Grenelle.

That’s because I was once a minor employee in the shack serving as Grenelle’s district hall; because people saw me in the Births section growing pale and breaking into tears when the newborn child was wrapped in a shirt that the poor father had taken from his own back, the father now shivering in the cold of winter. I knew some who died from it, and I went to their funerals.

They remembered me ten years later. My name, thrown out by one of those fathers who had come in shirtsleeves through the snow, was picked up and carried like the child, in work clothes.

“You’re happy now, I hope!”
"Yes, happy that the people thought of me. But that little
nomination, you know this is true as well as I do, is a death
sentence!"

"Seriously, you think we'll be wiped out?"
"Guillotined or shot, take your choice! If we're shot we'll
be damn lucky."
"Brrrrr! It sends chills up your spine to think of having your
head chopped off!"

My comrade doesn't look overjoyed by the prospects, but
deep down he still hopes that I'm hammering it up and just
pretending to see a hecatomb.

Let him hope, I have to go to my post.

"Could you please tell me where the Commune is meeting?"
I asked that question of all the echoes at the Hotel de Ville.
I walked through empty halls and full halls without finding
anyone able to help me.

I met colleagues no more informed but much more infuri-
ated. They were complaining about the Central Committee,
which seemed to be playing a joke on them by making them
cool their heels outside closed doors.

At last! We found it!
Lamps had been lit in the former home of the Departmental
Commission, and that was where we were going to deliberate.
We sought our seats, sought our friends, sought an attitude
and a tone of voice.

Our voices would not echo here as they did in ballrooms
made for big bass drums and bigger bass voices; the place
didn't have the acoustics for oratorical storms.
The speaker was not to have a high raised platform from
which to drop gestures and fiery gazes.

In this tiered amphitheatre everyone had to say his bit from
the bench, standing in the half-moon of the bay. Even before
taking off, declamations would have lead in their wings.

We would need facts, not phrases; the millstone of eloquence

grinding up wheat, not the windmill turned by gusts of hot
air and great words.

Everyone was seated, the Commune had taken its place and
there was a great silence.

But I suddenly felt as if my eardrums had burst. An indi-
vidual seated behind me had stood and, like a German pianist,
was shaking long, straight hair greasing the collar of his coat
and rolling pale blue eyes behind the glass of his pince-nez
while protesting in a fevered voice against what I don't know
who had said.

This I-don't-know-who may be myself, since I just asked
how those Parisian representatives who were at the same time
deputies to Versailles were planning to work out their little
problem.

You have to know where you stand!
The man with the weeping-willow hair declared that, rather
than listen to demands made in such a tone, he was withdra-
ving. He threw his overcoat across his arm and stomped out,
slamming the door behind him.

A handy thing to do!
But did I think about leaving, shaking the dust from my
shoes in the process, when I saw clear as day that our side
would be gobbled up by the Jacobin majority?
The greater the danger, the more sacred the duty not to
leave!

Why didn't that Tirard remain to represent and defend those
who elected him?

"I'm rejoining the Government! Are you going to arrest
me?" he shouted, looking furiously under his glasses.
Oh no! You won't be arrested! You know that perfectly well,
derserter! You don't even have the courage to let your eyes see
feverish Paris. Some others may resign, but they will continue
to live on the streets from which the Revolution surged and will even risk being devoured by it! Have a good trip.

What else happened that day? Nothing. Opening formalities.

But, as we were leaving, someone came up to me. “You really hurt Delescluze a while ago. He thinks you meant him when you were talking about the men hesitating between Paris and Versailles.”

“And he’s angry?”

“No, he’s sad.”

It was true, his mask was no longer furrowed by the wrinkle of disdain; worry was in his eyes, melancholy on his relaxed lips.

He was out of his element among all these overalls and all this insubordination. His own Republic had roads traced out, military frontiers and outposts, combat cadence, regular stops for martyrdom.

All that had been changed.

He was lost and wandering, without authority and without prestige, in a world that so far had neither program nor plan—and did not want a leader.

And this veteran of classical revolution, the legendary prison hero who, having been in on the suffering, wanted to be in on the honor as well, thought himself entitled to two inches of dais and found himself at ground level with no one looking at him with particular interest, with everyone listening to him perhaps less than to Clément, the dyer, who had come from Vaugirard in clogs.

I felt pity and respect before the sadness he could not hide. It made me suffer to see him trying to double his stride to keep up with the federals’ accelerated pace; his will was running out of breath and bleeding in its attempt to join the marching Commune.

His effort was a complete confession, an act of penance, a silent and heroic admission of thirty years of injustice to those he had treated as troublemakers, even as traitors, because they were moving faster than his Old Man of the Mountain Committee.

From his heart, until then armored by discipline, sprang real tears that he choked off but which still moistened the metal of his eyes and rusted his voice when he thanked me for the explanation that I had given him with all the formality a young man owes to an old man whom he has wounded, without intending to . . . and made cry.

Sectarians are terrible! Raw recruits or veterans, wardens of the Convention or socialists of the Church!

Vermorel: a priest who pasted on mustaches; an ex-choir boy who one angry morning ripped off his scarlet gown—there’s a scrap of that gown in his flag.

His gestures bear traces of the masses he once served, and his youthful look adds even more to the resemblance.

In provincial processions you can see the same kind of big lad going to seed, with a cute little head, round and sweet under a rose-red skullcap, strewn flower petals or waving the censer in front of the platform from which the prelate is giving his blessing.

Vermorel’s skull recalls the little purple lid even though he has put on the Phrygian cap.

He almost lisps, like all the priests’ Benjamin’s, and eternally smiles the smile that is a tool of the priest’s trade—a white laugh in a white face, a face the color of the host. All over his body this atheist and socialist bears the mark of the seminary!

But he has killed all stench of baseness and hypocrisy along with his religious education. Along with his black stockings he has torn off the believer’s underground veneers—although he has kept his fierce virtues, silent energy, single-minded devotion to a goal, unconscious dream of torture.

He entered the Revolution through the sacristy door, like a
missionary in China walking in front of the cangue; and he
brought with him cruel fervor, a need to excommunicate the
infidel and flagellate the lukewarm—until he himself can be
pierced through with arrows and crucified by the dirty nails
of slander!

He reads his red breviary every day, comments his new Life
of the Saints page-by-page, prepares the beatification of Marat,
the Friend of the People, and the Incorruptible One, Robes-
pierre, whose revolutionary sermons he is publishing and whose
death he secretly envies.

Oh, how he would love to perish under Charlotte Corday’s
knife or the Thermidor pistol!

Sometimes we fight about that.
I hate Robespierre the deist and I don’t think we should
ape Marat, the galley slave of suspicion, the lunatic of the
Terror, the maniac of a bloody age.

My curses join Vermorel’s when he attacks Cavaignac’s ac-
complices in the June massacre, when he threatens Ledru’s fat
ass, Favre’s vile face, Garnier-Pagès’ mole, Pelletan’s prophetic
beard...but, more sacrilegious than he, I also spit on Maxi-
milien Robespierre’s vest and split, like the ear of a cast horse,
the buttonhole of the cornflower-blue suit in which the tricolor
bouquet bloomed on the feast day of the Supreme Being.

To think that that may be why Vermorel, without saying it
or knowing it, defends the murderer of Hébert and Danton!
Because unfrocked priests do nothing but change cults and,
even in the army of heresy itself, always remember religion.
Their faith or their hate is simply redirected, they will, if it’s
useful, march like the Jesuits—their first masters—down the
road of treachery toward the goal they have sworn to reach.

Vermorel should have been born in ’93. He could have been
the Sixtus the Fifth of a social papacy. There are dreams of
dictatorship deep in this man who came too late or too early
into a too-cowardly world.

Sometimes he is extremely bitter.
For those who have believed in heaven, the earth is often
too small; and, unable to strike or be struck in the sunlight on
the steps of some urban Vatican, these deserters of the pulpit
gnaw away at their fists in the shadows. Having ruminated on
life everlasting, they write in life narrow and poverty-stricken.

Spleen, gluttonous as a cancer, eats the place where they
once thought they had a soul and brings the nausea of revul-
sion to nostrils that once palpitated to the smell of incense.
Lack of this perfume makes them seek the perfume of gun-
powder...but the air is filled only with torpor and hesita-
tion! They flounder about a little longer; one fine night they
swallow poison to die like beasts—which have no soul.

That’s what he did once.
He gave himself six months. He tried to use up his fever and
distribute his disease as, in succession, editor, subscription taker,
novelist, hack writer in the Latin Quarter, releasing a book on
Bullier, founding a weekly gazette, then writing a novel,
Desperanza. His activities bit everything but bit into nothing.
So he bought a drug that kills, decided to die...then
clutched existence after losing a little of his melancholy while
vomiting up the arsenic.

They say that love had something to do with his attempt.
Love, no! A woman, maybe.

This terrible wanter, this extreme worker fights night and
day with a woman who’s the companion of his hearth and bed.
His head, made for great wounds—a barricade injury or a
scaffold blade—is sometimes scratched and ridiculous. A shrew
has him in her claws and escorts him through crowded streets
with insults.

His home must witness many tearful scenes! The house-
keeper of this lay priest is killing him with stabs from her
pins. He may like this voodoo, he may be nostalgic for the
glimpsed hairshirt and thirsty for vinegar—offered at the end of a domestic broomstick for lack of the Golgotha spear!

He has never heard a spring gurgle, never listened to a bird chirp—carrying his sky within himself, he has never contemplated the horizon and followed with his eyes an insane cloud, a golden star, the dying sun.

Since he does not love the earth, it irritates him to see me digging my feet into it as if I were transplanting a tree every time I find a meadow that resembles a bit of Farreyrolles.

He admits the soil only as a chessboard on which there are bishops to mislead, knights to unhorse, kings to checkmate. He sees flowers only if they are in the sights of a rifle preparing to fire; and he will listen to the sound of leaves when they begin to grow on flagpoles.

Consequently he scorns me. He considers me a poet and calls me a loafer because I wrote my articles, even my combat articles, over there, in the country, in a boat, at the end of a creek, under the willows; because in the evening I leaned my elbows on a window sill and watched a field where the only thing standing out in the shadow was the skeleton of a plough—whose blade occasionally glistened in the moonlight like a flashing axe.

How much simpler are those who have always been with the people!

Ranvier: a long slim body on top of which is stuck, as at the end of a pike, a livid head, which would appear to be severed if he closed his eyes.

That head already seems to have lost all its blood against the firing-squad wall or into the executioner’s basket; even his hair hangs loose like the tangled hair of a tortured prisoner. His lips are white and display at the edges the relaxed pout of a dying man.

When he’s at rest, that’s the physiognomy of Ranvier, destined by his precocious paleness to martyrdom, wearing in advance the brand of a life of sadness and a tragic death.

But let him open his mouth to speak and a childlike smile illuminates his face; his voice, hoarsened by consumption, soothes his listeners with a trace of a Berry accent and an aftertaste of impish mischief. He must really have sung at Vespers in his village when he was young, for he has preserved something of the singsong tone of the responses deep in his throat, which has since been burned by the city’s polluted air.

He was a petty capitalist; bankruptcy ate his few sous. He never talks about it, he may think he has besmirched the party’s banner—but the wanness powdering his face might have come the morning the receiver informed him of his forfeiture.

Those who know him realize that he suffers because of his failure . . . but how many also realize that he was and is a good and honorable man!

Sober, drinking sirops—the great corpse—in order to be able to toast with the wine drinkers; eating little in order to leave his share for others; by working nights he’s barely able to feed six children growing up around him without a mother.

She died after educating her husband—a woman with a courageous heart to whose devotion those kids owe eternal gratitude; they may also owe her eternal distress for dropping the yeast of social anger to ferment into their hearts, for preaching solidarity with the humble and the injured’s right to revolt, preaching it even as she lay on her death pallet!

... 

XXIX Sunday, May 21 The last session had been heated. Three members of the minority presented themselves to declare that their devotion to a no-quarter struggle against the enemy outweighed all other considerations, that they would
go back on their decision not to return to the Hotel de Ville since there was a chance that people would consider their anger with the Committee of Public Safety nothing but a pretext for escaping bloody responsibilities.

Ah! Better to languish under the tent made with the shreds of '93, better to accept a renewal of the dictatorship old as the hills, the dictatorship we considered an insult to the new revolution, better to do anything—than seem to be abandoning the fight!

And peace was made; it was concluded verbally at the sound of a cannon shot which, suddenly, made window panes rattle and hearts stand still. It burst without warning and echoed, powerful and gloomy.

Hand in hand, comrades!

Today the session is even more solemn.

In order to ratify the reconciliation of day before yesterday, the group has just named as its president Vingtras, the man whose newspaper has been the voice of the dissidents since the beginning of the struggle.

And the members of the minority who, like Tridon, had made it a point of honor not to come, remaining faithful despite everything to the resolution they had passed, have taken their seats this time; the reason is that it was written in the Declaration attacked by the poor that if one day it became necessary to judge one of our own, justice would be rendered with all flags united, all hatreds extinguished, in the repopulated hall of the Commune, established as a supreme tribunal.

Cluseret, the accused, is about to be led in.

Here he is! His fate is going to be decided.

“What did he say?”

Bitterness had been lessened, distrust calmed.

Anyone could see that acquittal was to be the end of the debate, but speeches were nevertheless rolling along imposingly. The orators were reflective and the audience silent.

At that moment a door opened, the door ordinarily used by members of the Committee of Public Safety, and Billioray appeared.

He asked for the floor.

“When Vermorel has finished,” I replied.

“I have a message for the Assembly, a most urgent message.”

“Go ahead!”

He read the paper he held in his hand.

It was a dispatch from Dombrowski.

“The Versailles forces have just broken into the city.”

A cloak of silence over everything.

It lasted long enough for everyone to say goodbye to his life. It seemed to me that all my blood was moving toward earth as my eyes grew clearer and larger in my pale face.

It seemed to me that I glimpsed far away, very far away, a grotesque, misshapen silhouette. I saw myself covered with mud!

Oh, fear of torture had nothing to do with it, nothing at all. It was my pride that was dying. Conquered! Killed! Before doing a thing! . . .

In one second those thoughts cut down my spirit.

President of the Commune’s agony, how will you ring its death knell?

Letting the silence hover—long enough to show history that calm had not deserted our souls at the news of defeat, in the first spasms of our death throes—I resumed in a voice I had armed with serenity and addressed Cluseret: “The accused has the floor to defend himself.”

I felt it was good to end on a note of justice, to appear to have forgotten danger in order not to delay a verdict on which a man’s honor and existence depended.
It's over—innocent!
The meeting is adjourned.

I head for my seat to get some scraps of paper lying there on which I have scrawled the opening lines of tomorrow's article.

XXX Tomorrow!
I assume we have only a few hours to embrace those we love, knock out a last will and testament, if it's worth the trouble, and prepare ourselves to face the executioners.

How decadent I am! I'd like to dine royally before leaving. Surely I'm allowed to gargle my throat and heart with some vintage wine before they wash my head or rinse out my intestines with lead.

Such a tiny thing won't destroy the Commune! And I shall have been lucky enough to end like a high-lifer after living like a low-starver.

"Mme. Laveur, a bottle of Nuits, black pudding with apples, a forty-sou almond cake—what I don't eat I'll take when I go—and some of grandmother's pastries, those up there on the cupboard, you know! . . . Gentlemen, to your health!"

I hung around there for at least an hour. I found the Burgundy so pleasant, the pudding so robust, the cake so sweet! "Another glass of champagne?"
"Oh no! Can't afford to get high!"
I threw down the napkin and picked up my hat.
With Langevin I headed for the area where we'd heard we could find Lisbonne.

The Versailles Gate "Present, Colonel!"
"Good! The thirty-sou privates will be pleased to have those who govern beside them. All is in order, I have taken the necessary measures. I'm dead on my feet. I'm going over to that corner and steal a nap. You should do the same, believe me; you'd better not wear yourselves out ahead of time."

We took his advice, stretched out on a fatigue jacket and laid our heads on field packs, not so very far from a bed where, hideous in a sky-blue uniform, was lying an Algerian rifleman, Lisbonne's aide-de-camp, blown apart by a shell the day before; his smashed skull looked as if it had been gnawed by rats.

I couldn't sleep! My ear to the ground, I was listening for noises that might come from far away.

Is there any coordinated defense, any overall plan? I heard that General La Cécilia, the commanding officer for this part of Paris, is carrying these secrets around in his saddlebags. He's supposed to come give Lisbonne the latest orders.

We know nothing at all!
When at the Commune we tried to bring up the subject of war, the Military Committee rattled its spurs and we were sent off to Public Education or some other place—everyone in his niche.

"Have you ever been a soldier? What do you know about fighting? A commission has been named, don't foul it up with your inkwells. Let the specialists take care of their specialty."

Ah! Then I listened to them, now I'm wringing my hands! La Cécilia, where is he? I can't hear the steps of his famous black horse, which, they say, he likes to make prance.

I feel like getting up, taking the first nag I find, jumping on it and galloping to Paris to scream out my rage, to appeal to the people.
But that would be deserting in the face of the enemy.
This morning the guards surprised some overly ragged women and some evil-looking men. They used poverty to explain their nocturnal promenade, and, when one of them said
he was going to a field to look for something to eat, I acted in the name of my former hunger and kept him from being shot. His hands were very white, though, his accent very pure!

Sleep is coming now. I take one last look, heavy and somber, around this poorly lit room, where five or six of us have collapsed on the floor; we stop snoring when a shell explodes nearby, but we don’t really worry about such a little thing.

*Monday. To Arms!* “Get up!”
Lisbonne shaking us.
“Is something up?”
“Almost nothing, a regiment of the line, that’s all. Look, you can see their red pants from here.”

A little fever—from sleeping! Chills up and down the spine—due to the cool morning! A wave of melancholy in my heart—at the sight of the livid sky!
Where is my sash?
Men mass around us.
“Say something to them,” Lisbonne whispered to me while smoothing out his tunic and buckling his belt.
I made a little speech and went to take my place on the barricade, loosening my overcoat belt as I walked. Langevin did the same.

Lisbonne had climbed on top of the paving stones . . . they could get a clear shot at him from the end of the street.
It was his turn to speak as a revolutionary, and he concluded with the gesture of a Roman orator throwing the flap of his toga over his shoulder. Except his jacket was too short, and pull as he would he couldn’t get it past his navel.
Langevin was astonished to see me smiling. A flash of humor had in fact run across my lips when I rediscovered the actor in the hero, but I had seen that actor for only a moment in the combat setting lit by the paleness of dawn.

Costuming apart, Colonel Lisbonne spoke simply, frankly and pluckily.
He climbed up a little higher, raised his Tyrolean cap, and, turning toward the Versailles troops, shouted, “Long live the Commune!”
To work now!
“Something’s missing here,” a guard pointed out.
“The stones aren’t right there,” maintained another.
“Do we have enough cartridges?” asked a third.

So now complaints were rising from all sides. Grumbling could be heard.
It wasn’t the government infantry firing. The federals were shooting at us with words of reproach and anger.
“We’re tired! We’ve been hanging around here for weeks! We want to see our wives again! . . . Not one precaution has been taken!”
One after another they pointed to the yawning hole in the barricade, the hole we had no sacks for—the infernal hole just high enough to let the early light pass through and illuminate the void as a raw white spot! All the battalion’s courage might run out that hole!

“Is courage what’s missing?”
Oh no! Love of their home is what’s twisting their guts. They want to kiss the child and caress the little woman before diving into the unknown, the final battle, on the streets of this Paris where they are willing to die if the end has really come.
These are not career soldiers used to sleeping in a barracks. These irregulars have a family, they’re lost in camp and on bivouac.

Besides, they’re afraid of our ignorance, they don’t believe that these two who govern, a mechanic and a journalist, that even this colonel—who used to be an actor—have what it takes to command against real officers from Saint-Cyr, returned from Algeria, hardened in war, tanned, disciplined, tempered!
We were overrun; they pushed us to a shed where we deliberated; jerky sentences, furious gestures.

"Where are the orders? What's the plan?"

Those words were shouted out loud, the same words I had whispered softly to myself while waiting with my ear to the ground for La Cécilia's horse.

"You'd better get away," said Lisbonne; "they might put you against the wall and shoot you! Me, they know me, they like me a little. I'm going to try and keep them here."

"Cab!"
"Here, sir."
"You aren't afraid up there, friend?"
"Afraid? I'm from Belleville! And come on, I know damn well who you are! Giddap, Cocotte!"

The bullets were whistling, Cocotte shook her back, the driver leaned over to chat.

"They will not get in, citizen... if everyone defends his quarter well."

That idea was going to kill us! Quarter by quarter! The Commune would fall back!

From Le Trocadéro, the troops had fired on the Champ-de-Mars. The Military School was emptied along with the Ministry of War!
I clambered up the staircase and smashed in the doors.

Nobody!

Below, the gallop of defeat!

"Everybody's at the Hotel de Ville," a captain shouted to me from under the vault.

"That's where they're all going!" said the officers on the way to Place de Grève.

A few resolute individuals tried to block the road.

"You shall not pass!" they screamed.

One of them, his hair blowing in the wind, his arms bare, his shirt opened, displayed a hairy chest matted by blood. He had just been hit by a thrown bayonet, but he was brandishing his own against the multitude.

"Halt!"

And he was about to stab into the group!

Oh yeah, lots of luck; the human flood carried him off, him and his weapon, like a crumb of flesh, like a tiny iron filing, without a cry, without even a movement rippling through the air. All that could be heard was the crowd swarming about, like a herd of buffalo marching through the dust.

Hotel de Ville They were there, La Cécilia and twenty more; corps commanders or members of the Commune.

Faces were gloomy; people were talking in an undertone.

"All is lost!"

"Take those words back and cram them down your throat, Vingtras! We must shout to the people that the city will be the tomb of the Versailles army, we have to give them fresh courage and send out the order to erect the barricades."

I told what I had seen.

"At the Versailles gate they might have hesitated, I don't deny it. But, in Paris, you'll see them hold out against the soldiers as long as they have cartridges and artillery."

In Paris! But what is Paris saying?

I've seen nothing but a rout since the sun came up!

Noon Where was my head! I thought the city was going to play dead before being killed, and now women and children are doing their part. A beautiful girl had just erected a brand new red flag and, above those gray rocks, it has the effect of a red poppy on an old wall.

"Your paving stone, citizen."

Fever everywhere, or rather health. No one shouting, no one drinking. Just from time to time a trip to the bar, and, quickly,
lips are wiped with the back of the hand, the man gets back to business.

“We’re going to do our damnedest to put in a good day’s work,” one of this morning’s whiners tells me. “You had doubts about us a while ago, comrade. Drop by when things get hot, you’ll see who’s a coward!”

The poppy harvest is waving in the wind . . . they can die now.

No sign of a leader! No one with four silver braids on his kepi, no one wearing the Commune’s gold-tasseled belt.

I almost felt like hiding mine so I wouldn’t look like I had come after the work was done; besides, hardly anyone saluted it.

“Your place is not here,” a wrinkled old federal told me brutally, “get with the others, constitute yourselves a committee, make a decision about something! So you’ve prepared nothing? Oh, Goddamn! . . . Get that cannon over here, François! Woman, put the ammo there!”

I’m not worth as much as that cartridge roller and this cannon pusher. I wear a sash, I don’t count!

 XXXI  Vth District  But maybe those who’ve been with me since I started defending myself against life will be pleased to see standing in their midst at this final moment their old comrade in poverty and labor, the poor devil in worn-out clothes who walked so long in the Luxembourg Gardens.

This Latin country, where languished my sorrowful youth, has up to now sent combatants to social wars only on the side of the murderers. Prudhomme’s nephews have always shrunk from battles in which their frock coats might rub against overalls, in which the foreman of the barricades might shout at college graduates—if they got in the way of a maneuver and made it hard to fire.

Who knows but what they’ll be stronger if they have one of their own as captain!

I ran to the Hotel de Ville.

“Gambon, put a seal on that, make it official.”

“Good idea! They all know you around the Sorbonne. Only, you’re on bad terms with Régère, aren’t you? Still, there’s your paper . . . And now, embrace me! You can’t tell what might happen.”

He embraced me while initialing, as a member of the Committee of Public Safety, my commission as the representative charged with directing defenses at the Pantheon.

I’m by no means a strategist. How do you fortify a quarter? How do you arrange a battery of guns?

Could you expect an educated man to know something?

When I passed Sainte-Barbe and Louis-le-Grand colleges, I shook my fist at them—a pupil with graying mustaches angry at those barracks for not having taught him anything he could use against troops.

Régère stood with the majority and was one of the maniacs. We’re still on speaking terms, though. But he wants to retain command—exclusive command.

Okay, Jacques, cram the paper into your pocket; invoke nothing but a past at the Library and the Odéon and weeks of distress and prison spent with your old friends.

I found several of them in the street. Half ran away to hide, but the rest joined me—bravely!

It may be hard to believe, but I had to sign a whole pile of deputizing forms in the name of my crumpled commission, which I had pulled out of my vest pocket.

You have to have some of those little scraps of paper for people with a twenty-year-old pride. They risk being shot tonight in order to have an officer’s commission to show around this morning.
But they went to work: piling, hauling, loading—and compromising themselves to death.
That's what we need!
If some of these sons of good families are massacred or transported tomorrow, seeds of insurrection will be planted in the bourgeois' field.

I walked and spoke in the bivouac around the Pantheon. Oh, they weren't saying nice things about the Commune!
"If it had just been more energetic!"
"And if you hadn't put the people to sleep with your moderate paper, Vingtras," contributed a lieutenant, who almost grabbed me by the throat.
No doubt about it, the minority was not popular in this company.
An explosion!
"Hey! I'll have to put a patch on my overcoat."
A little lower and it would have been my skin that needed sewing up.
A pistol fired . . . by accident.

We settled our differences.
Rancor holds its tongue in the face of an approaching enemy.
An enemy at Gare Montparnasse already!
Will they attack the quarter?
"Why don't we attack them?"
This idea was thrown out that evening, in the council of commanding officers, by a former friend who was also literate but who did not believe in the classical system of defense behind stones.
"Let's move forward and knock them out of their positions!"
"That's madness!" unanimously rebutted those who had been soldiers.

Courageous madness in any case, which might disconcert the adversary and could scarcely be more dangerous than passive resistance! But we remained alone with our madman's scheme, my comrade and I, vowing to each other that we would stick it out to the end, side by side, come what may.
"If I'm wounded seriously, do you promise to finish me off?"
"Yes, provided you'll do the same for me if I get it first."
"You've got a deal."

I'm just terribly afraid of suffering; out of cowardice, I would prefer death. Although to die leaning against a wall and getting a final pop from a buddy is not exactly a happy ending!
"And getting your guts ripped out by bayonets, you think that would be fun?"
"Your guts ripped out!"
"My dear fellow, if they could have, those soldiers would have chopped us up when we were preaching war to the death. This time they'll use their sword as a corkscrew and pop out our eyes. It's our fault they had to leave their villages again."

A man came up to me. "Citizen, do you want to see what a traitor's corpse looks like?"
"Someone's been executed?"
"Yeah, a baker, he denied it at first, then he admitted it."

The federal saw me turn pale.
"Maybe you would have voted for acquittal—Jesus God! Can't you see that to smash in one Judas' head saves the heads of a thousand of your own men! Blood horrifies me, and my hands are covered with it; he grabbed me and held on when I shot him! But where would you be if you couldn't find anybody to kill spies?"

Someone intervened in the debate. "That's not all! You want to keep your paws clean for the time when you stand before the court or before posterity! And we're the ones, the poor, the workers, we're the ones who always have to do the dirty work.
. . . So everybody can spit on us later, right?"
That angry man was speaking the truth!
Yes, you want to stay clean for history and not have slaughterhouse filth attached to your name.
Admit that to yourself, Vingtras, don’t consider it a virtue that your face turned white before the dead baker.

**Tuesday, Five A.M.** Fighting has begun near the Pantheon.
Oh, how sad they are, under this rising sun, these litters all besmattered with human gore! They’re the wounded from up there—from rue Vavin and boulevard Arago—being brought to the ambulances.
I slept someplace in the mayor’s office; a dead man’s neighbor again, just like the night before.
The baker was there, behind those boards, and a stream of water kept rolling wet straws to my feet.

I was awakened at the crack of dawn and set out for the barricades.
But, on the way, commanders and captains stopped me, clasped my hands, the Basques, asking for ammunition, bread, advice... a few wanted a speech.
A few were threatening: “You mean after the Commune’s done all this you’re going to let it have the right to speak!”

Oh, it bewilders me! And no one with me to give information and support, to share the burden! Of the members of the Commune elected by the quarter, I’ve thus far seen only Régère, worried, hidden, crouching in the district office—and Joubré, who appeared for a moment, but who has many other responsibilities on his shoulders.
He’s the one holding the final francs that must nourish the insurrection, pay for the foodstuffs demanded so loudly by the most resolute men. Moreover, his ministry is burning, thanks to the Versailles shells.
And I am alone.

From time to time I’m slammed against a house and hear men debate whether to kill me.
Würtz, the Alsatian, one of Ferré’s examining magistrates, just got me out of a tough spot in the nick of time.

“You’re not Vingtras!”
People gathered around.
“A spy! Blow him to bits!”
“To the mayor’s office! To the mayor’s office!”
“Why go to the office? There, against the fence.”
“Jacques Vingtras has a full beard. You’re not Jacques Vingtras.”
“Up against the wall!”
This wall was the front of a café on rue Soufflot.
I tried to explain. “Goddamn it, I’ve been clean-shaven since I escaped from Cherche-Midi!”

I firmly believe that despite everything they were going to let me have it until Würtz leapt furiously into the middle of the group. “What’s going on here?”
They knew him even if they did not know me, and he swore that I had a right to my name.
“Pardon, forgive us, citizen!”
I shook myself like a wet dog and we went to get a drink... all together.
Now that people are really sure that I’m Vingtras, I’m the prisoner of all the battalions that come up, whose officers want to squeeze the hand—or the neck—of the editor-in-chief of the *Cri du Peuple*, the only scarlet sash to be seen around the district.
And details strike me, choke me! I’m the one people come to for everything. For everything—and for nothing.
Since the fighting began I’ve barely had time to look at how we’re defending ourselves. Two or three times I’ve tried to go up to where Lisbonne and Henry Bauer are holding out like madmen.
But I was kept back, called back, taken back, usually because men were crying treason and someone was struggling in the hands of suspicious, exasperated men calling for summary justice.

However, so far as I know, no one was killed except the baker. It is true that I heard they shot the officer Pavia in a courtyard, without shouting, for fear I would save him, but no one has actually seen his body.

A courier. "Rue Vavin is asking for help."
It's the turn of the Children of Père Duchêne to head for the barricade in distress.
They do not have to be told twice.
"Vermersch up front!"
The call arose from several quarters.
But Vermersch wasn't there.
"Oh, those penpushers, those damn journalists! . . . Curled up somewhere when it's time to fight."
"You want a journalist? Right here!"

Forward march!
The drum beats. I'm near it, and its deep vibrations echo in my heart. My skin is quivering as much as the canvas.

Halfway there, some men attracted by the noise took me aside.
"You have to come. . . Versailles has spies working to get the Vêt district hall; they're in cahoots with the engineers holding Montparnasse. My name is Salvador, you must know me, you heard me at the medical school club. Believe me, follow us . . . At Carrefour Bréa, anybody could do your job, but at Saint-Sulpice they'll surely listen to you."
"Go with him if it'll do some good," said the captain of the Children of Père Duchêne.

There was indeed an argument, almost a battle.
I tried to see what it was all about.

But Varlin came up—Varlin, who was the idol of the quarter, who established silence the moment he walked in.
I was free!

Not yet. An officer stationed in the fifth had been looking everywhere for me. As soon as he saw me, he said, "Vingtras, will you please go back over there? They're talking about blowing up the Pantheon."
I went back.

A dozen shells were exploding around the Saint-Sulpice fountain and casting stinking fragments under the soles of our shoes.
The profile of a priest on a curtain! If the federals with me see him, he's a dead man!
No! . . . They did not see him. . . . Let's hurry by.
The street was empty and gloomy, filled only with fragments of iron scurrying before us and behind us like rats heading for the sewer.
The houses were shut. All those doors and windows without eyes looked like huge blind faces.

At a street corner a real blind man, his mmt at his feet, said pitiable, "Please give me something."
I had known him for thirty years. He'd come there with black hair, now it was white. It seemed to me that he'd been in the same place on December 3, 1851, when Ranc, Arthur Arnould and I had come to seize this same district hall where our men were today—with traitors besides!

Another bomb, more stinking hot iron!
"Please give me something."

Oh beggar, even cannon fire cannot make you let go of your bowl! Machine designed for cowardice, you have the impassiveness of a hero! And your guttural shout comes out as a soothing
monotone in this human storm, never relents in this relentless struggle!

There he is, against the church column, like a statue—the statue of Handicap and Poverty, standing in a world that had dreamed of curing wounds and freeing the poor.

His appeal is answered! Men setting out for battle throw away money and beg for cartridges.

"Thank you, sir, you are kind."

XXXII  OH, I FELT terrible that morning when, on the way to the Red Cross quarter to see how the combatants were doing, I saw women running away, carrying their clothes in a sheet and dragging their kids by the hand.

"They're setting fire to everything!"

These women were shouting or weeping. Some stopped running long enough to spit curses at me.

I wanted to stretch my red sash across the panic and chain it up. But you don't stop maniacs—no more on rue de Buci than at the Versailles gate!

A café owner who a few times had let me have "four sous worth of rice and three of chocolate" when I was down and out hung onto me desperately and screamed, "You're not going to let the quarter burn! You're a good man! If you have to, you'll throw yourself and your battalion against the arsonists!"

For a while I was held tight by this woman and others, by old men and children, a group of twenty weeping humans wringing their hands and asking where they should go now that they had heard all was to perish. . . .

I finally managed to escape. I ducked up the first side street and hid my sash.

On the way, in rue Casimir-Delavigne, there was a reading room where for ten years I had gone to work and read news-
papers. They would let me in there, and I would have two minutes, five—time for my conscience to judge the arson.

I knocked.

"Come in."

I wanted to be alone with myself for a moment . . . it was very hard!

The people begged me to give up the struggle. "It'll be merciless slaughter, maybe terrible torture, if you stick it out!"

"Goddamn it, I know that!"

"Think of your mother, your death would kill her!"

Oh, the bastards, they had found my weak spot! And now, like a coward, I forgot the burning street, my function, my duty. Heart and mind, everything was filled with memories of the country, and I saw, as if she had just walked into the room, a lady in widow's weeds and a white net bonnet. Her big black eyes were staring at me like the eyes of an insane woman, and her dried-up, yellow hands were rising in a gesture of unspeakable dismay.

A volley of shots!

Two or three federals ran past the window, dropping their rifles on the pavement.

"Look! . . . They're running away!"

"They're running away! But I don't have the right to run. Leave me alone, I beg you! I need to think by myself."

It's all thought out. I'm staying with those who are killing—and who will be killed.

What were they talking about, those wild women screaming that "all was to 'perish'? Somebody poured burning gas on two or three buildings. So what?

Let's see! At school, all those books treating glorious Rome
or invincible Sparta were filled with burnings, it seems to me—with burnings saluted as dawns by triumphant generals, or set by a besieged populace that assumed the duty of greeting History. My final student orations were in honor of heroic resistances...of Numance in ruins, of Carthage in ashes, Saragossa in flames.

And Captain Faillard, decorated in the Russian campaign, used to tip his hat every time he mentioned the Kremlin, which those Russian dogs had lit like a flaming punch. "What guts! Oh, those Kaiserliks!" he would say, twisting his mustache.

And the Palatinate sacked and roasted! And a hundred corners of the world burned in the name of kings or republics, in the name of the God of the Jews or the God of the Christians!

And the Zaatcha grottos! Doesn’t Péllissier have shreds of burned skins on his bootees? Péllissier de Malakoff!

We have not yet, so far as I know, rammed Versailles’ troops into a cave and cooked them alive!

Oh, I did not give in, I did not become an arsonist, before embracing with my eyes the whole of our past, before searching for ancestors!

Two of us worked it out, Larochette and I—we’ve been to school—then four of us, then ten. All voted for flames, all!

One of them was frothing in anger.

“And the wretched poor asked for mercy for their four pieces of furniture! But it’s for the poor that we’re fighting, hundreds of artillerymen have had not their shirt but the hair on their chest singed by cannon fire, enemy cannon fire! And Goddamn it, the man right here talking to you, I myself, I was rich before coming into social politics—ten years ago. Didn’t I throw it all in the garbage? ... And today, just because a little wood and a few bricks get hurt by the strategy of desperate men, damned if the people we ruined ourselves for, the people we’re going to die for, aren’t tripping us up with their bundles of rags!”

He laughed like a raving maniac.

“I can understand the bourgeois’ fury,” he added, turning toward the area from which came the regular sound of barrages. “The light of the torch has shown them the gleam of an invincible weapon, of the tool no one can break, the tool rebels will from this moment on pass from hand to hand along the road of civil wars... What is this compared to that?” he concluded, pushing away his rifle and pointing to the bloody smoke putting the red cap on an entire quarter.

“So you were saying, Lieutenant, that we need to think about burning part of rue Vavin?”

“Yes, two houses whose walls have been broken down by the Versailles engineers. The regulars can swoop through the breach and catch us by surprise. You know them, the two houses on the corner? ... In the one on the right, first floor, there’s a bakery.”

How funny!

First I cuddled up next to the body of a dough-kneader, now I’m going to have a pile of wheat executed.

Fire and blood for the country of bread! More ground wheat will be roasted than would have been needed to feed me through all my years of famine!

“Come on! Put your name there, Vingtras!”

“There it is. ... and burn down an extra couple of houses if you need to.”

I gave him a blank order.

“Hot dog! We knew damn well you wouldn’t chicken out!”

Laughing, a federal took from his pocket an old issue of the _Cri du Peuple_ and pointed to a line, “If M. Thiers is a chemist, he’ll understand.”

“‘You’d already thought of it, huh?’”

“No! And I’m not the one who wrote that red-hot sentence.
I read it one morning in a collaborator’s article. I found it a bit too much, but I sure wasn’t going to knock it out. And the Versailles papers all said it was easy to recognize my bandit instincts and wild beast claws.”

“Yeah,” declared Totole, “we want to blow up the Pantheon.”

Totole is a battalion leader with unlimited influence on his companies, although he looks like a carefree tramp; during the siege he stomped in and hurled insults at the Germans with such bravery, he was so cheerful and so heroic, that the men elected him unanimously.

His idea was greeted with enthusiastic cheers.

“You’re not the one to defend monuments,” Totole said to me. “Monuments, for Vingtraz, oh wow! He snaps his fingers at temples of glory and boxes of great men! Right, citizen? Come on, let’s go figure out how to blast all those things to hell.”

I had a terrible time trying to hold Totole back and explain to him that although I did not love monuments, I was not exactly enthusiastic about using them to wipe out half of Paris.

But they were damned stubborn, and, despite all I said, the Pantheon was condemned to death. Up against the wall, Pantheon!

And while we’re at it, up against the wall Saint-Etienne-du-Mont and Sainte-Geneviève Library, too. You won’t be any extra trouble.

We had to get four or five of us together, including bigwigs, the mayor in the lead, a few responsible officers, a group of calmer federals, in order to prevent these hotheaded from charging the Pantheon as if it were a dirty reactionary. They were already putting the fuse between its toes; it had been rubbed with saltpeter and bathed in gas.

“You think you’re going to terrify the bumpkins, but you’re just going to terrify our own men! You’ll make housewives think you’re thieves, the other quarters will fall all the way back to the Prussians, maybe even all the way to Versailles.”

We had to feed them that stuff, take them by a tunic button, lecture them for an hour.

We also had to find arguments to use against a little old man who had been persistently scratching his skull throughout the discussion and who finally said, in a most gentle voice, “To tell the truth, citizens, it seems to me that it would be better for the honor of the Commune if we did not withdraw before the explosion. It won’t be a good piece of work unless we stay and get blown to bits with the soldiers. I’m not an orator, citizens, but I’ve got a little sense... Forgive me, I’m nervous... I’ve never spoken in public. But, considering this is the first time I’ve got up the nerve to try it, I think I’m making an excellent proposal. But let’s hurry; if we talk much longer we’ll never blow up. Never!” he concluded, with an enormous sigh.

He’s the one who saved the defendant. People laughed at his fear of not being blown sky high, and nobody talked about it anymore.

Hôtel des Grands Hommes I’ve been here since midnight.

There are a lot of us here, almost all the leaders of the Vth and XIlth who do not have a military command.

We’re sharing a ham and our ideas.

“Chaudey, you know?” said my neighbor to the left, with a gesture explaining everything.

I haven’t been mixed up in any killing yet. I’m very lucky.

But a few others had been at the Pélagie post and they described the execution.

“How did he die?”

“Not badly.”

“And the cops?”

“Not well.”

The diners were discussing it as if they were referring to a
play they had seen as members of the audience, a play in which they had had no role.

In the morning, when the firing resumed, there would be plenty of time to go to our post stretching and yawning.

Since we were sure of defeat, we could at least have a drink together before our number came up.

*Wednesday Morning* Lisbonne looked desperate as he walked over to me. "All our positions have been taken. Everybody's discouraged, that's part of the reason . . . we've got to decide on one maneuver, make up our minds to stick with a single plan."

"What should we do?"

"Let's try to figure it out! Together, Régère, Sémerie, you, me, Longuet . . . ."

Longuet was in fact with us; he too had come back to the Latin country.

We went up to the mayor's office, closed the door, locked it so no one would hear our anguished words, our consultation *in extremis*.

. . . . . . . . . . . . .

Oh! I have just been hurt to the quick, I have felt the pain that suddenly fills the veins of dishonored men!

The commanding officer, like Lisbonne, thought that defense was senseless. Dr. Sémerie, head of the ambulance corps, agreed with the commanding officer, so the mayor stood up:

"We're going to sign the order for our men to put down their weapons!"

It reminded me of the day Clusaret was accused.

"You're not going to call me a traitor!" he had said, ramming his hands through his hair and shaking his head as if he had been slapped.

And he reeled before collapsing senseless on a bench.

I've just experienced that same vertigo.

"Give up! Longuet, would you do that! And the rest of you?"

"That's what I'm going to do," the commanding officer said coldly.

The doctor became indignant. "So you want the quarter to be strewn with corpses and drowned in blood? You're assuming responsibility for that!"

"Yes, I'm assuming responsibility for not signing an order the federals wouldn't obey anyway. I do not want my name to be disgraced in the rebels' camp. I won't let that happen! My presence here has already made me your accomplice, and, if you capitulate, either you'll have to kill me or I'll have to kill myself!"

"We didn't understand each other!" said Régère, frightened by my emotion. He has done many bad things, but he's not a coward.

Sémerie also appeared to have calmed down.

But I'm afraid of them.

"Longuet, let's hurry and find our men! Where is the Commune?"

"At the XIth district hall. That's where Delesslueze is; nothing comes out of there, but that's where everything ends up. That's where we have to go."

"Let's go!"

A powerful explosion echoed around us and shook the windows.

The Luxembourg!

But the Luxembourg was still standing. Only the powder magazine had blown up . . . Totole wanted his explosion, and he got it.

I saw him coming back rubbing his hands.

"What did you expect, I wouldn't have died happy. But it
didn't do a damn bit of good, there weren't any regulars there yet. We missed!"

At his side a man was pulling out his hair. "We should have stayed!"

They'll finally get their Pantheon, that joker and that desperate old man. They're insane from defeat, and nothing we can do would stop them.

 XXXIII  A bright sun, lovely weather!

In the calm streets we took, trailing vines hung over walls and the broken rocks of barricades. Flower pots crowned the peaks of stone dikes.

The Seine flowed gleaming and blue between deserted quais drowned in light.

Once the river was crossed, the resistance began to appear more robust. Every pile of paving stones had attached to it a handful of men who saluted us and responded to our bad news in this way: "Here we may be luckier. . . . And besides, what the hell! We'll do what we have to, that's all there is to say!"

And the guards sat back down, like peasants resting at noon, peasants whose lunch had been brought to them in the fields.

Dresses next to the jackets, small sizes of work clothes as well. The wife and kid had brought a little soup and some greens; the cloth had been spread on hard rocks.

We offered a few glasses. They said, "Not too much." We didn't find a single man drunk, really drunk, among all those with whom we tried to toast.

    Place Voltaire, XIth District Hall  The Commune is now in session.

"Where?"

"Up there, in the big hall."

That's wrong! The Commune is not in session.

Everybody's mixed in together, officers, simple guards, wearers of kepis with one or more braids, belts with white tassels or yellow tassels, members of our body or of the Central Committee—and all these people are deliberating.

A lieutenant standing on a table asked for a circle of determined men to be established around the district, a circle of men devoted entirely to seeing that no one escaped. "We've already had some desertions," he shouted in a threatening voice. "We'll have more."

Stretching his arm in the direction of a doorway where a few well-dressed men were fuming, he added, "Twelve balls for anyone trying to flee."

The loss of Montmartre had infuriated the calmest men and loosened the wind of suspicion.

Montmartre, supposedly armed for a tooth-and-nail struggle; Montmartre, whose general staff, sprung from no one knew where, kept the whole world at a distance; Montmartre, whose War Delegate ate civilians for breakfast; Montmartre had surrendered, sold out! The balls were not the right caliber, the big guns kept collapsing, false orders had been given . . . the tricolor flag was waving over the heights!

That betrayal had decimated the defense. It had also marked for death all those who, in the last two days, had been seized by a federal's grip or designated by a woman's thumb—inside that circle drawn by blood from which the dwarf Caesar, Thiers, had departed and to which he wanted to return.

He had not spared the Republic's pocketbook in his attempt to get the better of the republicans; he must have offered mules laden with gold for the opening of certain passages. Otherwise the sacred Hill that had vomited up Vinoy and swallowed down two generals would never have been profaned so quickly by his soldiers.

Some suspects have already passed before us, rolled up by the
crowd; we dived into the flood but could not fish out the traitor.

One had guts. He had fired from a window; he bragged about it with his last breath and fell screaming, "Down with the Commune!"

Another one denied being a traitor and asked to be led "before the proper authorities." He spoke as a coupon clipper from Le Marais. "I've never been mixed up in politics!"

"That's why I'm killing you," replied a fighter who'd been hit in the left paw one hour before and was using his right paw to aim a revolver at the man in the grip of the crowd.

And he was about to shoot when it was decided that people should perhaps not be executed without proof and that this man should be led to Public Safety, the "authorities" he was begging for as often as his sobs would allow.

"The Committee'll let him go . . . as sure as I've lost five fingers," grumbled the wounded man, shaking his red stump. "Not mixed up in politics! . . . They're the biggest cowards of all. I hate that kind of a son of a bitch! They wait until after the slaughter to see who to spit on and who to suck up to!"

And, pale with rage, he ran toward the prisoner's escort—on the way he lost the rags around his wound and did not stop to pick them up. He simply jammed his hand, a fat blood clot, into his jacket pocket.

What a frightening sight, a man drowning in human waves! Sometimes he raises his head above the whirlpool like a drowned corpse and looks at heaven. . . . The last one even called upon God! But a blow from a fist or a rifle butt got him, and he sank again to come up once more, his head bruised and tossing loosely on his neck.

"But what if he wasn't guilty!"

"Do the police put on kid gloves to smash their victims? Does justice look twice to see if the defendant really did what he's accused of . . . when, after tying him up, after giving him the third degree, after jail, after Mazas, it sends an innocent man to court so the jury can acquit him? And how about when he's found guilty! Irons, a black suit, a scaffold—or the galleys."

He broke off and began to count, frenetically, the cartridges in his pouch.

Varlin arrived with a cart. "Where did I get this coach? It's the executioner's carriage."

"What're you talking about?"

Near him, in a shouting, gesticulating group, I recognized Malezieu, the smith.

"About Dombrowski. Just imagine, I'm the one who stopped him at Saint-Ouen. I thought he was trying to escape. He had all the signs and then some! Saddled horses in a corner, his aides looking toward the Prussians . . . oh, he sure as hell wasn't setting out for Paris! And that's the man who was supposed to get himself killed so bravely!"

"I'm here to tell you it was suspicious," a federal contributed energetically. "Forget everything but when he brought us Versailles' proposals, and you're still an awful long way from proving he hadn't worked something out with Thiers."

His corpse was still intact in its coffin, and his memory was already crumbling to dust. Vermorel had just wasted time and trouble giving the Pole's funeral oration.

After walking around the soldiers' bivouacs, I was returning to the district hall with Lefrançais, Longuet, a few other comrades.

I was struck on the shoulder. Genton, the Blanquist.

"How's it going?"

"Whew! Not so well. We just did a dirty job; we had to shoot the archbishop of Paris, M. Bonjean, three or four more."

A kind of black runt stuck in his bit. "Darboy tried to give me his blessing; as it turned out, I gave him mine!"

I knew that little shrimp. He was a wild man at the meet-
ings—and a fanatic supporter of a couple’s right to live together without being married.

He had an illegitimate wife whom he adored and who had him wrapped around her little finger; he responded to her tantrums with the adoring caresses of a child. Things would be patched up quickly, the little woman was not really bad, and it was touching to see that tiny blackbird cooing under the wing of his fat hen.

That’s the blackbird who just got his feathers ruffled and, on the way to the wall, whistled in the prelate’s ear the joking song of his impiety.

Lefrançais, Longuet, myself, we all turned pale. “And by what right, in whose name was he killed? The entire Commune will be responsible for that execution. His brains splattered all over our official sashes!”

“Ferré signed the order; Ranvier too, I hear.”

“Is that true?”

Ferré does not surprise me. I met him just after he had due-processed Vaysset and watched the corpse take a dive from the Pont-Neuf into the Seine. He had been calm and smiling.

He’s a fanatic. He believes in force and uses it. Words like “cruel” and “generous” mean nothing to him.

He “gets even” with an unarmed man as with anybody else, making no distinction, blow for blow, a head for a head—a wolf’s head or a sheep’s head—stamping mechanically with his delegate’s seal any paper leading to the suppression of the enemy.

The enemy is the priest or senator squatting in a prison cell. Good or bad, what difference does it make? They don’t count. Sorry, nothing personal. They’re statues that have to be overturned before history; June killed Affre, May will kill Darboy.

Poor man! I saw this Ferré, who just condemned him without pity, appear sympathetic when, after a visit to Mazas, I spoke to him about the pale captive feverishly wandering, almost free, about the large courtyard, who, at the sight of us, had scurried away like a cornered animal in the sights of a gun.

But the delegate to Police Headquarters felt he had to crush his heart as a traitor who’d sold out to the middle class, and, in the name of the Revolution, he obeyed the mob.

“But this slaughter is horrible! Those people were old, imprisoned, unarmed. Everybody will say it was cowardly!”

“Cowardly! Well, doctor professor, what about the September massacres? So you were just horsing around when you said we had to be like ’93.”

A classicist complained and wept. “You played the adversary’s game; that’s all Thiers needed, the little hyena must be licking his chops... Didn’t Flotte tell you about Versailles? He never gave up Blanc because he saw this coming, he was hoping for it, he had bayed for death... he had to have this supply of rulers, these pious corpses, these martyred bodies to hold up his President’s chair...”

“That may be!” a kid in the group replied. “But meanwhile everyone will know that the Commune may make decrees as a joke, but the people take them seriously. No matter what, my shot made a hole in heaven.”

Thursday. Belleville District Hall I rejoined Ranvier at the Belleville district hall.

He had just inspected the entire line of defense and was exhausted.

It was raining shells. The room was riddled with holes, the ceiling was crumbling on our heads. Every minute someone led in a prisoner he wanted to shoot.

Noise in the courtyard.

I leaned out the window. A man without a hat, well-dressed, was choosing the right place, his back to the wall. The right place to die.

“Am I okay here?”
“Yes.”
“Fire!”

He fell—he moved.
A pistol shot in the ear. This time he did not move.
It made my teeth chatter.
“You’re not going to get sick just because we swatted a fly?”
said Trinquet, who came in wiping his revolver.

Friday, Rue Ha xo  “They’ve got a new batch to get rid of!”
“Yeah?”
“Fifty-two priests—cops and police informers.”

Still another slaughter outside of battle?
I understood when they shot down the archbishop as the king had been beheaded. The Idea called for it, they thought an Example was necessary. But it’s done! The plebeian Bible has a tassel and red pages just like a Gothic missal.

There they are!
They move up, silent, an old, tall corporal in the lead, erect, marching militarily . . . some priests next, their skirts keep getting in the way, they have to trot from time to time to stay in line. The unequal gait does not prevent a cadence something like the one! two! of a marching company.
The crowd has fallen into step with them, the still-calm, still-silent crowd.
But now a hag yelps . . . they’re done for, they won’t get out of this!

“Over here, men of the Commune! Help!”
The men of the Commune ran up, came together and pushed against the multitude. They shouted, they swore . . . some of them wept.
The Commune was sent about its business.

In the rear, trying to catch up, was an old man without a kepí, his white hair sweaty and matted. He was moving as fast as he could on his sixty-year-old legs.
I recognized him.
I had seen that straggler whose head kept shaking at old Beslay’s house during the siege and the last days of the Empire. We had squabbled; I was considered undisciplined and inhumanly bloody.
I shouted to him, “Faster, come help us, they’re going to massacre them in five minutes.”

Fury was beginning to trot around the flanks of the flock. We heard a woman from the canteen shouting, “Kill them!”
The old man stopped to catch his breath and, brandishing his rifle in wrinkled hands, he repeated in his turn, “Kill them! Kill them!”
“What! You too!”
He pushed me aside like a madman. “Come on, get out of the way! There’s about sixty of them? . . . That’s just what I wanted! I saw exactly sixty men shot after they had been promised they wouldn’t be!”
“Listen to me!”
“Move your ass or I’ll shoot you!”

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

A volley from the squad, a few isolated shots first, then a long round . . . a long, long round.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Some federals returned, chatting.
At a table in a small café the old man sat wiping his brow.
He called me.
“I was rough with you a while ago, but now that it’s over let’s be friends again. Oh, my dear fellow, I got my revenge! If you had seen Largilliére . . . he was hopping like a rabbit.”
Largilliére! I should have known!
“But the others!”
“The others! They paid for the betrayal of rue Lafayette. It’s not politics now, it’s assassination. I don’t understand a thing about what you’re doing, Gallifet threw me in all this. I’m not with the communards, but I’m against executioners in epaulets. . . . Just let me hear about another place where I can give it to them. I’ll go there, too!”

Under the snow of his brows his eyes were flashing with anger.

He stopped a woman passing by. “Have a drink with us.”
“Fine. Just let me get a little water to wash my sleeves.”

Thirty years old, not at all ugly, sad looking.
She came back and we talked.
This one had no opinions about the Social Revolution either; but her sister had been the mistress of a priest, got pregnant and left her family after stealing their savings.
“That’s why I came down when I saw cassocks passing under my window, that’s why I pulled the beard of one that looked like Céline’s lover, that’s why I shouted ‘Kill them! Kill them!’ and that’s why my wrists are red.”

She also told us the story of the canteen girl who had given the signal for the massacre.
That girl was the daughter of a man arrested at the end of the Empire after being identified by an undercover agent; he died in prison. When she heard some spies were going to be shot, she followed along and gave the command to fire.
Her ball had been the first to strike Largillière.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...

XXXIV Saturday. Place des Trois-Bornes We were on our feet all night. At dawn Cournet, Theisz, Camélinat and I went back toward Paris.
Rue d’Angoulême was still holding out. The 209th, the bat-talion in which Camélinat was color-bearer, was defending itself desperately.
When they saw their comrade come up, they gave him a real ovation. People liked me, too, but their affection was mixed with disdain. First of all, I was in the “government,” then I’d never in my life been able to bear anything, not even my sash, which I always tied too high or too low, which, before the danger, I had sadly carried under my arm, rolled up in a newspaper—like a lobster.
“Hey, look, you damned dilettante, it must have been really nice playing Baudin up there with your arms crossed while we were on all fours chewing up muck!”

They had in fact been lying with their belly in the mire for an hour, their noses were filthy, their clothes heavy with mud; they were firing through holes at ground level and inflicting frightful losses on the enemy.

The member of the Commune was leaning against the corner of the barricade. His forehead even rose above the stones, and balls were circling his head in a narrowing halo. The fighters were not satisfied. Sure, he was taking part in the danger, but he had to fight, too, get a mouthful of muck, rub his nose in the dirt, hug the ground like everybody else.
“Dilettante!”
Bah! They finally gave me a pain. Since they did not want to listen to me, I took back my freedom and decided to choose my own ground.
Once, when I was commander of the 191st, I made up for my bumpkin look and military incompetence by swearing that I would be with the battalion or what remained of it when the end came.
I was going to keep my promise.

What remained of it was not much, but that little was glad to see me.
“So you won’t leave?”
“No!”
"That's good, citizen."

Sunday, May 28. Five a.m. We were at the giant barricade at the foot of rue de Belleville, almost in front of Favié hall. I drew straws with the officer who had replaced me to see which of us would lie down for a while.

I got the good straw and stretched out in an old bed at the back of an abandoned apartment. I slept poorly. Worms eating the stuffing out of the mattress suddenly crawled all over my skin—they were in a real hurry to leave!

I relieved my colleague.

So far I've fought my confederates more than I've fought the Versailles forces. Now that this is the only quarter still free, now that no traitors or suspicious individuals are still around to be judged, the job is easier. All we have to do is hold out for honor and stand near the flag like officers near the mainmast on a sinking ship.

That's where I am.

We reply with rifles and artillery to the terrible fire directed at us.

Our men put pallets in the windows of La Veilleuse and all the houses at the corner, pallets whose guts are now smoking from holes made by the projectiles.

From time to time a head pops mechanically over a rail.

Got ya!

We have a big gun operated by silent, brave artillerists. One of them is no older than twenty, his hair the color of wheat, his eyes the color of cornflowers. He blushes like a girl when someone compliments him on the accuracy of a shot.

A moment of calm.

"Maybe he's coming to talk?"

"To ask us to give up!"

"Give up! Let him come!"

"You want to take him prisoner?"

"Who do you think we are? That kind of treachery is reserved for Versailles' men! But I'd like to shout what Cambronne said."

Some cries were heard from the direction of rue Rebeval.

"Could they have slipped around behind us while their messenger got our attention? . . . Vingtras, go see!"

"What's up?"

"This guy here, he thinks he can stay and refuse to do his share of the work!"

"Yes, I refuse . . . I'm against war."

And the guy: forty years old, a prophet's beard, a peaceful face, came up to me and said, "Yes, I am for peace and not war! Neither for them nor for you . . . I defy you to make me fight!"

But that line of reasoning does not please the federalists. "You think we wouldn't rather do like you? You imagine we're out here throwing things at each other to pass the time? . . . Come on! Take this snuffbox and sneeze or I'll make you breathe it myself—and I can do it!"

"I am for peace and not war!"

"Dirty pig! Do you want the snuffbox . . . or do you want me to snuff you out?"

He retreated before the threat and followed the man, carrying his rifle like a crutch.

The Versailles delegate was moving away.

"Shit!" growled the commander, standing erect on his lookout post atop the paving stones.

Suddenly the windows emptied, the dike was breaking.

The blond artilleryman cried out. A bullet had struck his forehead and given him a black eye between his two blue eyes.

"We're done for! Every man for himself!"
"Who's willing to hide two insurrectionists?"
We shouted that in the courtyards, our eyes staring at all
the windows, like beggars waiting for a penny.
No one gave us alms! Alms requested with weapons in our
hands.

Twenty feet from us, a tricolor flag!
That flag was there, clean, shiny and new, its fresh hues
insulting our own, whose scraps were still hanging here and
there, scorched, muddy and stinking like crushed, ground-up
poppies.

A woman called to us.
"My man's at the next ambulance. I'll take you there if you
want."
And she led us through the hail of lead in front of us, be-
hind us, shattering the glass in the street lamps, severing the
branches of the chestnut trees.

We made it. Just in time.
A surgeon came over, the Red Cross on his arm.
"Doctor, help us!"
"No, you'd get all my patients killed!"
In the street again!
But the husband knew another place for the wounded, not
too far away.
We went there.
"Will you have us?"
"Yes!"

The answer came clearly and jauntily from a female canteen
worker in full uniform—a superb creature twenty-five years
old, her full bust and narrow waist enclosed in armor of blue
cloth. This beauty didn't beat around the bush!

"Look, I've got fifteen wounded. You'll be the doctor, your
friend can be an intern helping you."
And she tied the clinic's apron around our waists.
We ate and restored ourselves. She beat eggs, conjured up
an omelette, poured us some convalesceents' wine... We
forgot the danger over dessert... our skin was warm and our
eyes alive.

But from the amputees' room came a sigh that touched our
hearts.
"Please come talk to me before I die!"
We rose from the table. It was too late.

Near that still-warm corpse, in that dark room—the skylights
were padded—sad thoughts conquered us once more. We
silently tried to catch a glimpse of the street through a crack.
A sailor was roaming about like a jackal. Behind him, an-
other sailor, then an infantryman, a company, a beardless lieu-
tenant.
"Everybody out!"
I went out first.

"Who's in charge of the ambulance?"
"I am."
"Your name?"
I had been taught my lesson. I recited it.
"Why this carriage?"
The nurse had had it prepared so we could hop in and get
away if anything went wrong.
I replied, without stuttering, "You're here to do your duty,
I'm here to do mine: find cripples and care for them!"
He wrinkled his brow and stared at me.
"Do we have to unhitch the horses?"
He looked at me again and, with the end of his baton, mo-
tioned to clear the road.
"You coming, Laroquette?"
"No, you won't get twenty yards. You're going to your death!"

I'm even trotting to it, for I'm pushing the beast right along. I was almost captured ten times, and I thought it was all over when an officer of the line unknowingly saved me. He threw himself in front of the horse.

"Not this way! Those bastards are still shooting from up there."
"Okay! In that case, my place is here; my lancet can do some good."
And I scrambled down from the seat.
"You're not yellow, for a civilian," said the soldier with a laugh.
"Captain, I'm so thirsty I feel like I'm going to die. Is there any way to get a glass of champagne in this god-forsaken place?"
"In that café, maybe."

We killed the bottle and I climbed back on the running board.
"I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again, Doctor!"
That little farewell calmed the suspicious men wandering around the vehicle who had made me decide on hypocrisy and wine.
"Whip 'er up, driver!"

My driver did not seem to know who his passenger was and was apparently hurrying simply to increase his tip.

We really had to get a move on, though.
"Medic!"

I passed colleagues displaying violet collars and gold ornaments among men eating or washing gun carriages.

More than one turned as I went by. But who would recognize Jacques Vingtras? . . . My face was not hairy and I was wearing dark glasses.

A little earlier I had seen in a store mirror a clean-shaven, bony head, pale as a priest's, hair combed to the rear, no part! A pitiless physiognomy. The look of a cruel soldier. They must have taken me for a fanatic searching out wounded men not so I could help them but so I could finish them off.

"Wounded? We don't make any!" one sergeant told me.
"And our regiment's surgeons help our men find special spots. But you could do some good if you'd get those stiffs out of here. They've been stinking up the place for two days."

He stopped talking . . . fortunately! I was seeing red.

"One! Two!"

We were hoisting the "stiffs" into the cart.

So now government soldiers themselves were leading our nag along and pushing against the wheel to help us hurry away with the corpses about to give them plague.

Over one of those corpses, one we picked up behind a pile of wood in a lumberyard, flies were buzzing as they do around a dog that's been run over.

We had seven of them. All we could hold. My apron had become a large splotch of clotted blood. Even the soldiers of the infantry averted their eyes, and we galloped freely down a road of horror.

"Where are you going?" asked one last guard.
"There, to Saint-Antoine hospital."

It was full of armband-wearers.
I walked straight up to them and pointed to my load of human flesh.
"Pour your bodies into that room."

It was paved with corpses; an arm blocked my way, an arm that death had seized and fixed in a heroic gesture of defiance,
tense, threatening, ending in a closed fist that must have grazed the nose of an officer before the firing squad.

The victims were being searched. On one they found a composition notebook; it was a little ten-year-old girl whom a bayonet thrust had bled like a pig, in the neck, without cutting a small pink ribbon holding a brass medal.

On another, a rat-tail file, some spectacles, four sous, and a paper indicating she'd been a nurse and was forty years old.

Elsewhere, an old man's bare torso emerging from the charnel pile. All his blood had flowed out, and his mask was so pale it made the white wall it was propped against look gray. A marble bust, a piece of a fallen statue, the object of public contempt.

The man taking inventory was unexpectedly called to identify a suspect. He asked me to replace him for a minute.

"Go to the corner of the table."

That allowed me to hide my eyes; but sometimes I had to answer a question and show my voice.

The cataloguer returned and sat back down. "You're free now. Thanks."

Free! Not yet, but I'd better be soon ... or I'll join the pile.

"Come on, hurry up!" muttered my guide in a frightened voice. "They're worrying about who you are."

Fortunately they were killing not far away; no one wanted to miss the show so they all hurried over.

The tumult protected us. We were on our way again.

"Halt! Identify yourself!"

I displayed my lugubrious receipt.

"Fine, go ahead. . . . Stop!"

"What now?"

"Would you take a wounded soldier to the ambulance?"

Would I!

We've got it made now. We have our regular army man. I could kiss him!

He asked me to dress his wound. Oh Goddamn!

"No good, no good! It shouldn't be dressed."

He insisted. What the hell, I'll dress his wound and kill him in the process.

He was finally dissuaded. But what does he want now?

"Doctor, Doctor! There's our colonel and my commander.

I'd really like to tell them goodbye!"

"No good, no good! Emotions, my son, give you fever."

We're trotting on velvet now.

Every time we round a cape filled with soldiers, I play the guardian angel to my infantryman. He's in bad shape! . . . I just hope he lasts to Pitié hospital.

Hell! The horse lost a shoe and went lame. She won't go much farther. We worked her too hard.

"You see," said the driver, "we should've made her drink some blood."

Oh, this time I'm done for!

A man over there has sent his gaze deep into my eyes and found me out, I feel it. Isn't he the one who, at the Débats, wrinkled his brow while reading Michelet's letter for our friends at La Villette and looked like he wanted the prisoners executed on the spot? Today all he has to do is make a sign and his killers will carve me up.

Not this time. Did he believe he was mistaken? Was he horrified by the thought of informing? He moved away.

"That's M. du Camp over there," said an officer pointing at him.

That officer, in his turn, stood squarely in front of me. My heart was leaping in my chest.

But suddenly the canvas was opened, the dying man showed his cadaverous face and, extending his arm in an undefined
movement, stammered, “Let me shake your hand before dying, captain!”

He gasped “Ahhh!” and fell backwards. His skull bumped against the wall of the cart.

“Poor devil! Thank you, Doctor.”

Hurry, let’s go. Oh, that nag! Giddap, damn it, giddap!

We had to rearrange our corpse. We rushed through the Pitié gate.

The director was in the courtyard. He recognized me at once.

I went to him.

“Are you going to turn me in?”

“I’ll let you know in five minutes.”

I found those five minutes almost short. I barely had time to smooth out my shirt, straighten my collar and run my fingers through my hair. So many things to do! An appearance to patch up, words to leave behind me, an attitude to assume!

The director came back and spoke to the guard. “Open the gate.”

He turned on his heels, completely exhausted, without any wish to see my gesture of gratitude.

The crippled hobbyhorse set out once more.

“Where are we going?”

“Rue Montparnasse.”

To Sainte-Beuve’s secretary’s house! He would hide me, if I could get to him.

But the two of us and our dying horse were passing through the places where I’d lived for twenty years, where I’d spent Tuesday with the Père Duchêne battalion, where everyone had seen me constantly the first three days of the week.

It broke down the driver’s courage.

“I want to save my own skin . . . I’ve had enough! Get out, goodbye!”

He roused his beast with a terrible slash of the whip and disappeared.

Where to hide?

Let’s see. Passage du Commerce, twenty feet away, a house where I once lived; the deserted road leads down rue de l’Eperon and an alley!

The quarter has been in enemy hands for five full days; few red pants.

I climbed the stairs. The house was in an uproar.

“Yes, me, Captain Leterrier, I’m telling you that your Vingtras died like a coward! He dragged himself along the ground! He wept! He begged for mercy! . . . I saw him!”

I knocked gently, the landlady came to open the door.

“It’s me, don’t shout! If you send me away I’m a dead man. . . .”

“Come in, M. Vingtras.”

XXXV  I’ve been waiting deep in my hole for weeks, waiting for a chance to slip between their fingers.

Will I escape from them? I don’t think so.

At least two times I’ve given myself away. Neighbors might have seen me stick out my head, pale as a drowned man’s.

What the hell! If they get me, they get me.

I am at peace with myself.

I know now, because I have thought about it in silence, my eyes staring at the horizon, at the Satory pole—the crucifix of us all—I know that the madness of crowds is the crime of good people, and I no longer worry about my memory, choked by smoke and clotted with blood!

It will be washed clean by time, and my name will remain inscribed in the roster of social warriors as that of a worker who was not idle.

My bitterness has died—I’ve had my moment.

Many other children have been beat like me, many other
graduates have been hungry, and they reached the cemetery without having their youth avenged.

Look, you picked up your miseries and your pains and you led your pile of recruits to this revolt that was the great federation of sadness.

What can you have to complain about?

It's time. Let the searchers come, let the soldiers load their weapons—I am ready.

I've just crossed a stream that is the frontier. They won't get me! And I can be with the people again, if the people are thrown back into the street and driven into battle once more.

I raise my eyes to the sky above where I feel Paris to be. It's light blue, with red clouds. It looks like huge denim work clothes soaked in blood.

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AFTERWORD

The Insurrectionist is the final volume of Jacques Vingras, Valles' semiautobiographical trilogy whose first two volumes are The Child and The Graduate. The Child, published in 1878, describes the years between Vingras' birth and his bachelier degree, 1832–1849. The Graduate (1881) describes the young man's professional and political struggles in Paris between 1849 and 1857. The Insurrectionist, posthumously published in 1886, takes the youth to manhood and into the revolution known as the Paris Commune of 1871, the "great federation of sadness."

"Was I nursed by my mother? Did a peasant woman give me her milk? I really don't know. No matter what breast I bit into, I remember not one caress from the time when I was very small; I was not cuddled, fondled, koohey-kooed; I was whipped a lot.

"My mother says children must not be spoiled, and she whips me every morning. When she doesn't have time in the morning, it comes at noon, rarely later than four o'clock."

These are the opening words of The Child. Their bitterness, their unique stylistic features, the power of their appeal to the reader's imagination, their ability to arouse compassion without being maudlin, all set the tone for the 900-page trilogy that follows. Jacques Vingras describes the savage battle between a sane protagonist and a world which, if it is to survive, must eradicate any manifestation of sanity. Home, school, society—each appears bent on the spiritual and physical destruction of the narrator.

The Child almost detaches from the word "child" all its usual connotations. Trust, innocence, security and joy affront Vingras' parents and teachers, and he painfully learns to suppress such subversive attributes. At home the child is beaten mercilessly, criticized for wearing out his father's boots by
being kicked so often, tortured by cruel psychological games, frequently subjected to acute embarrassment "for his own good," indoctrinated with his parents' degrading obsession with saving a sou, and forced to share their incessant concern with maintaining dignity as conceived by a provincial teacher and his peasant wife. At school Vingtras is force-fed the works of Greek and Latin authors whom he hates, punished for putting ideas of his own into themes instead of imitating the masters, and taught never to say "rifle" when he means "arm that vomits death." The childhood Vallès portrays is seemingly calculated to induce only resentment and hatred.

The bitterness of *The Child* is matched by the piercing harshness of *The Graduate*'s depiction of youth. Endowed with his *bachelier* degree, Vingtras attempts to earn his living and very nearly joins those to whom he dedicates his book, the intelligentsia who, "fed on Greek and Latin, died of hunger." He is willing to teach, but headmasters cheat him, pupils constantly thrust at him noses to be wiped, and his mind is used only to help him remember to recite *ba*, *be*, *bi*, *bo*, *bu* from dawn to dusk. He attempts to use his literacy, but he can find only stifling dictionary work, a secretarial position for which he is unsuited because he can write Latin not French, and journalistic positions in which both cowardly editors and his own fear of compromising his father censor his thoughts. The emotional effects of his impotence are exacerbated by the separation of his parents and the subsequent death of his father, both of which make him feel strangely guilty.

At the end of *The Child* Vingtras said, "It's no good crying now, I have to live!" But the world in which he attempts to live is ruled by the forces of death. In the final scene of *The Graduate* Jacques Vingtras, apparently broken by his failures, renounces his vow to himself and follows in his father's footsteps by accepting a position in a provincial school. He is at this school and meditating on his cowardice in the first chapter of *The Insurrectionist*.

He is meditating on his political comrades' opinion of his cowardice as well, however. His discovery of those comrades and of his own commitment to political goals rescues *The Graduate* from the unrelieved negativism of *The Child*. Vingtras has become a perpetual insubordinate by the beginning of *The Insurrectionist*, although he himself is not fully aware of his maturation. The only child found friends, allies and objective justification for his personal resentment while observing that the society he hated was also guilty of crimes against a multitude of others, making Vingtras part of an army of the dispossessed—intellectuals, workers and the peasants he always adored—an army that one day would rise up and attack the world abusing him. *The Insurrectionist* shows the army mounting the attack as it shows Vingtras manifesting the avocation he perceived in *The Graduate*: "I am a rebel . . . my life will be a life of combat. . . . Society, I will sharpen the weapon that shall one day hack you to bits."

*The Child, The Graduate, The Insurrectionist:* one could almost say larva, pupa, adult. The three novels of Jacques Vingtras bear titles which, in the world they present, tell of a progression as predictable as an insect's metamorphosis. The boy is humiliated and whipped when he weeps at the funeral of a ten-year-old girl beaten to death by her humanist father. The man is imprisoned and shot at when he weeps at the sight of workers and their children being starved. The child's incomprehending resentment naturally and inevitably grows into the adult's revolutionary rage.

That rage is directed against a clearly defined society at a precise moment of history. *The Insurrectionist* makes full fictional use of that moment's characteristics. As French classical theatre depended for part of its effect on the audience's knowledge of the ancient myths providing its plots, so Vallès' novel depends in part on the reader's recognition of the political events to which it refers. *The Insurrectionist* moves inexorably toward the Commune as Racine's *Phaèdra* moves inexorably toward the destruction of Hippolytus. The reader should respond to steps in the preparation of social war as he responds to Phaedra's move toward revelation of her incestuous desires. A brief summary of the history of France during the period
Vingtras describes can facilitate comprehension and appreciation of Vallès' use of fact.

When the Commune was proclaimed in 1871, Parisian socialists had vowed not to repeat their mistakes of 1830 and 1848. In each of those years a revolution by both workers and bourgeoisie had been appropriated by the bourgeoisie. In June, 1848, workers attempted to regain control of the revolution they had made in February, only to be slaughtered by their former allies in one of the bloodiest struggles France had yet witnessed. Vingtras' projected history of the veterans of June, 1848, brought him into intimate contact with embittered men totally committed to the civil war that serves as the conclusion of The Insurrectionist.

The Second Republic put down the rebellion of 1848, but it itself was destroyed soon after. In the coup d'état of December 2, 1851, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, president of the Republic, became Napoleon III, emperor of France, to reign more or less tranquilly until 1870. In The Insurrectionist Vingtras returns to Paris in 1857. The government for which he works as a bureaucrat and against which he fights as a rebel is the Second Empire of Napoleon III. Paris' radical faction could organize no effective opposition to the emperor until near the end of his reign, when the funeral of Victor Noir, a journalist shot by a relative of Napoleon, became the massive demonstration against the government described in one of the central chapters of The Insurrectionist.

The Franco-Prussian War killed the Second Empire after Napoleon allowed France to be drawn into conflict with the Prussia of Chancellor Bismarck, General von Moltke and the arms of Krupp. At the battle of Sedan in September, 1870, the French army was captured almost in its entirety along with its emperor. Napoleon abdicated, a provisional republic was established and the Prussians besieged Paris.

The policies of the new republic were far too similar to those of the Empire for it to be accepted by French radicals. Convulsed by social conflict and exhausted by a war it was conducting with monstrous ineptitude, the regime capitulated to Bismarck's terms, including cession of Alsace-Lorraine, thus apparently declaring that all the hardships of the war and siege had been endured in vain. Rebels resenting both the government's conservatism and its cowardice attempted to overthrow it on October 31 and January 22. Each date has a role to play in The Insurrectionist's description of Paris between Sedan and March 18, 1871.

On that date the revolution actually came. On the heights of Montmartre the people of Paris successfully defended some cannon when the regular army troops sent to recapture the weapons refused to fire on the people. Two generals were killed, and the duly elected government of Adolphe Thiers withdrew to Versailles. Paris' socialists, finding themselves quite unexpectedly in charge of the city, joined a long French revolutionary tradition by declaring the capital a Commune. Socialist Paris was effectively separated from conservative France. The Versailles government, supported primarily by the provincial elements of the army, promptly put the city under siege as mercilessly as the Prussians had done.

The Commune withstood the attacks for only two months. On May 21, 1871, the troops of M. Thiers entered Paris and began the days of battle and massacre to be known in French history as Bloody Week. Savage street fighting led to murder of prisoners by both sides. The Commune executed hostages, as Vallès faithfully shows, but nothing it did approached the brutality of Versailles' suppression of the rebellion. The number of communards killed after being disarmed reached into the tens of thousands, and the domestic hatred caused by the Commune and its aftermath was fully as deep as the international hatred caused by the Franco-Prussian War. Vingtras' wild attempt to escape death at the conclusion of The Insurrectionist was typical of the usually less successful flights of thousands of Parisian leftists.

All the characters of The Insurrectionist are historical figures who lived through the events just summarized. In contrast to the preceding volumes of the trilogy, Vallès did not attempt to disguise his characters through pseudonyms. Appearing un-
der their real names (except that Vallès is Vingtras), characters perform the roles they held in the actual rebellion. Despite a few minor modifications of facts, Vallès' novel is frequently quoted by historians as if it were a memoir.

Some critics, considering the task of a novelist to be invention not transcription, are uneasy with a work relying so heavily on fact. *The Insurrectionist* increases this uneasiness by its insistently political bias, a violation of Stendhal's dictum that politics in a novel is like a pistol shot at a concert. Both its reliance on factual occurrences for its plot and its preoccupation with political concerns in character delineation have prevented *The Insurrectionist* from attaining its rightful place as a major French novel.

Unquestionably there are dangers involved in writing a novel such as *The Insurrectionist*. Describing characters who existed in fact might lead an author to neglect the procedures necessary to make them live in fiction; creating a world manifesting political ideas might produce falsification of reality through ideological bias. Vallès not only avoids these dangers, he creates a striking example of the contribution historical and political consciousness can make to the novelistic art. The Commune's central position in the description of Vingtras' attainment of manhood allows Vallès to communicate a powerful vision of man as a part of modern society. The political and psychological elements of this vision blend into a depiction of an integral humanity composed neither of autonomous egos nor of ideological ciphers.

Far from smothering the individual under political analysis, Vallès glorifies the individuals to such an extent that he has been accused by Marxist critics of mistaking adventurism for revolutionary commitment. Jacques Vingtras is an exuberantly vital character whose respect for the vitality of all men is evident both in the contact with others he describes and in the manner of description he adopts. The child who vigorously revolted against forces attempting to mold him in an alien image became an adult opposed to orthodoxy of any sort—political, religious and literary. Notorious among both friends and foes for his rejection of discipline, Vingtras was as much in the minority after the revolution as before it. One of his favorite words, "insubordinate," is the best adjective for the political stance of this sworn enemy of doctrinaire rigidity, who is so enamoured of spontaneity that he is incapable of being a leader of the masses he wants to aid. Time after time he passively insists on a crowd's independence of those at its head, his brief career as a military officer is farcically inglorious, and he takes over a municipal building only to realize he has no idea whatsoever of what one does after making a revolution.

In *The Graduate* Vingtras discovered his vocation as a violent rebel not through weighing social theories but while dueling and experiencing the exaltation of personal combat. The description of his political career in *The Insurrectionist* conforms to the individualistic circumstances of its origin, making the novel a nonideological, almost anti-ideological work. During the Commune Paris became a laboratory of the future experimenting with a variety of radical social theories. Karl Marx and nearly all subsequent architects of revolution considered the Commune a monumental event worthy of the closest study, Vallès completely neglects the theoretical importance of his insurrection and mentions none of the staggering number of prophetic measures taken by the Commune during its two months of existence. The reader's attention is always focused directly on a man within a revolutionary context, not on the context as an implementation of theory, as is evident in Vingtras' first thoughts on hearing that the Commune has been proclaimed:

"Well! It's the Revolution!"

"So here it is, the moment hoped for and awaited since the first time my father was cruel to me, since the first time my teacher slapped me, since the first day I spent without bread, since the first night I spent without lodging—vengeance for school, poverty and December!"

The only remotely political phrase is the last, a reference to the creation of the Second Empire on December 2, 1851. Even here Vingtras seems to be remembering the humiliation
he personally suffered as a result of the coup d'état, rather than the coup itself. Napoleon's seizure of power was usually designated as "December 2." Vingtras uses the more inclusive "December," the month in which he experienced the desperate futility of attempting to incite Paris to rebellion and the ignominy of returning to the provinces to be virtually imprisoned by his father. Revolution is an intimately personal act in this novel, which with reason, therefore, is entitled The Insurrectionist rather than The Insurrection.

Furthermore, Vallès' commitment to the individual gives his work a psychological depth missing in ordinary political works. The memorable literary form he created to portray the individual makes the novel a work of art whose form is perfectly suited to its subject. Almost perversely inappropriate for abstract analysis, it is the style of The Insurrectionist that communicates the immediate, concrete reality of men and events, those elements that usually constitute the material for analysis. The novel is conversational and slangy in the extreme. Vingtras' spirit and activities become directly meaningful as he instructs, exhorts, entertains and chats with the reader. He himself is the sole focus for the work's structural organization. Leaping from event to event without transition as events present themselves to Vingtras' memory, the narrative occasionally stops altogether to allow the narrator to practice his technique of verbal portraiture or to insert what he considers a particularly meaningful example of his journalism. Tenses shift back and forth according to Vingtras' wishes, not according to rules of narration. It is astonishing that a work guilty of so many violations of standard technique is even readable, but the miracle is that Vallès built a powerful novel out of his contempt for what most novelists consider courtesies due the reader. Rejection of accepted theories of fiction comes to be perceived as a natural manifestation of the narrator's seditious nature. Paragraphs are not organized around topic sentences, but they seem to be held together by the integral presence of a moment in time. Salient, revelatory details presented in series more than compensate for the absence of orderly exposition and description. The Insurrectionist moves and convinces without the slightest regard for approved methods of inducing emotion and suspension of disbelief, so that reading the work becomes in itself an act of insubordination.

A style capable of incarnating Vingtras' rebellion against the world naturally has strong political overtones, as does every other aspect of the novel. Vingtras' rejection of what he considers stifling political theory should not mislead the reader into considering The Insurrectionist anything other than a wholeheartedly political work. The rebel never defines the dialectical causes and effects of the Commune—perhaps he does not even understand them—but political considerations remain the motive force behind every episode of the novel. Vallès perceived and described a world dominated by the struggle between the forces of humanity and the forces of oppression. The feeling of the clash of parties is always present even though Vallès, like Balzac, represented parties by distinct individuals acting out of personal motives. The complete intermingling of pronounced individualism and communal political involvement is among the most remarkable features of The Insurrectionist.

Vingtras began to write in an attempt to console himself for not firing a rifle at Napoleon III. His literary work consequently emerges from political drives as unmistakable as those impelling a man to assassination, drives reflected in the revolutionary matrix enveloping every person and every event described. Even while showing that the murderers of Bloody Week often killed because of incongruously personal motives—a sister seduced by a priest, a father denounced by a police spy—Vallès also conveys the impression that political upheavals such as Bloody Week stand apart from the world of definable psychological motives. His commitment to the individual and his personal soul is evident in his refusal to make murder an act dictated by ideology; his political view of the individual is evident in the fact that both the revolutionary and reactionary parties become something other than the sum of their parts. The reader sees the social revolution enter and transform
men’s lives while those lives are being depicted through tragically personal anecdotes. It is a striking indication of indifference to ideology that Vingtras recounts his imprisonment for offenses against the Second Empire by writing of the bowel problems of his bizarre fellow inmates and not ever mentioning the characteristics of the ideological climate from which he deviated. It is an equally striking indication of a belief that politics is everywhere that those bowel problems become direct expressions of the prisoners’ political philosophies.

“I’ve never been mixed up in politics.” “That’s why I’m killing you.” This bit of dialogue from Vallès’ description of the cataclysm ending the Commune illustrates the aptness of revolution as an expression of the pervasiveness of politics. The Commune proved with awesome clarity that refusal of involvement commits a man as irrevocably as total involvement. Like Zola and Malraux, Vallès saw modern man as a creature necessarily part of a mass defining each of its components politically. The only difference between political and nonpolitical men is that the latter are not aware of what they are.

Vallès played upon the definition of the Commune given by history to create a fictional symbol for the nature of the world. Revolution covers every episode of the novel as the sky covers the earth, and it should be noted that in both the first and last chapters of the novel, the sky itself is made to represent the impossibility of political withdrawal. By projecting his work toward civil war, Vallès proclaimed the dreadful seriousness of revolutionary struggle. The Commune permeates The Insurrectionist as the witches permeate Macbeth.

One has only to think of the many inconsequential novels set in revolutionary periods to realize that the Commune was not a ready-made fictional symbol. Vallès displayed a full range of creative skills in making Vingtras’ insurrection express the meaning of existence within society. The Insurrectionist is unabashedly grounded in the historical circumstances of a century ago, but it uses history to create an artistic form communicating themes that transcend their age. Vallès was quoted on the walls of Paris during the student rebellion of May, 1968. His work was perceived as immediately relevant when students again attempted to affirm their individuality while forging themselves into a collective body with a political purpose.

The fact that the enrâgés saw a comrade in the insurrectionist is only one indication of Vallès’ contemporaneity. His reputation is currently on the rise in many quarters, and the present work offers the best illustrations of the reasons. By depicting an emphatically political universe, The Insurrectionist speaks directly to the contemporary reader who is increasingly aware of the political saturation of his own life. By presenting a man successfully contending with modern society’s manifold impingements on individual integrity, the novel affirms man’s ability to survive in a hostile age. The personal and political elements of The Insurrectionist merge into a powerful drama of man and the multitude of which he is necessarily a part.

The Jacques Vingtras trilogy supplies reasonably accurate biographical data about Vallès. As student, Bohemian, journalist and insurrectionist, Jacques Vingtras and Jules Vallès had essentially the same experiences and reactions. The preceding discussion of the trilogy therefore indicates the nature of the author’s life from his birth to his narrow escape from death during Bloody Week.

Vallès left France after hiding in Paris for eighty days during the repression of the communards. He went first to Belgium, but the danger of extradition and execution forced him to leave immediately and join the scores of his comrades granted refuge in London. With the exception of a few months in Switzerland and Belgium, he was to remain in England for nearly ten years.

For Vallès, exile was a succession of great hopes and great disappointments. Devoted to continuing the revolution through his writings, he encountered serious difficulties in putting his words before the public. No French newspaper would consider publishing him until 1875, and even the daring editors who then accepted his work censored him severely. His dreams of founding a newspaper in London came to nothing, and the journal he edited from Brussels died after its fifth issue. He
attempted a play that depicted France from 1848 to 1871; his friends were unanimous in denying his theatrical talent. Despite such frustrations, it was during his exile in England that Vallès conceived and began to execute *Jacques Vingtras*. The vast trilogy occupied him at intervals throughout the exile, and the first volume, *The Child*, was published under a pseudonym before Vallès returned to France in 1880 following the proclamation of a general amnesty for all the communards, even those who, like the author, had been condemned to death *in absentia*.

In Paris Vallès immediately began collaborating on several radical newspapers and involved himself once more in French literary and political battles. Working for “revolution on the shelves of the libraries as on the stones of the Barricades,” he became an important defender of most advanced literary schools. *The Graduate* was published in 1881, and Vallès’ principal goals for the remainder of his life were to complete his trilogy and resuscitate his *Cri du Peuple*, the newspaper already twice born and twice slaughtered. Both goals were realized. The new *Cri du Peuple* appeared in October, 1883, and quickly became one of France’s most controversial journals. Vallès was its editor until his death in 1885, by which date *The Insurrectionist* was completed for all practical purposes.

Vallès’ funeral was tumultuous. Huge crowds shouted “Long live the Commune! Long live Vingtras!” as they paid tribute to both the author and the rebel. In *The Insurrectionist* the author and the rebel are similarly indistinguishable. The journalist made his stormy adventures into a work of art, merged journalism and fiction into a moving incarnation of the Revolution and its soldiers. The reality of history animates *The Insurrectionist*, but its intensity and power place it in the best tradition of the novel. Vallès transformed politics into an aspect of the novel as essential as psychology, and he will be remembered for transmitting a vision of the world that comprehends the widest variety of human activity and aspirations.

Sandy Petrey