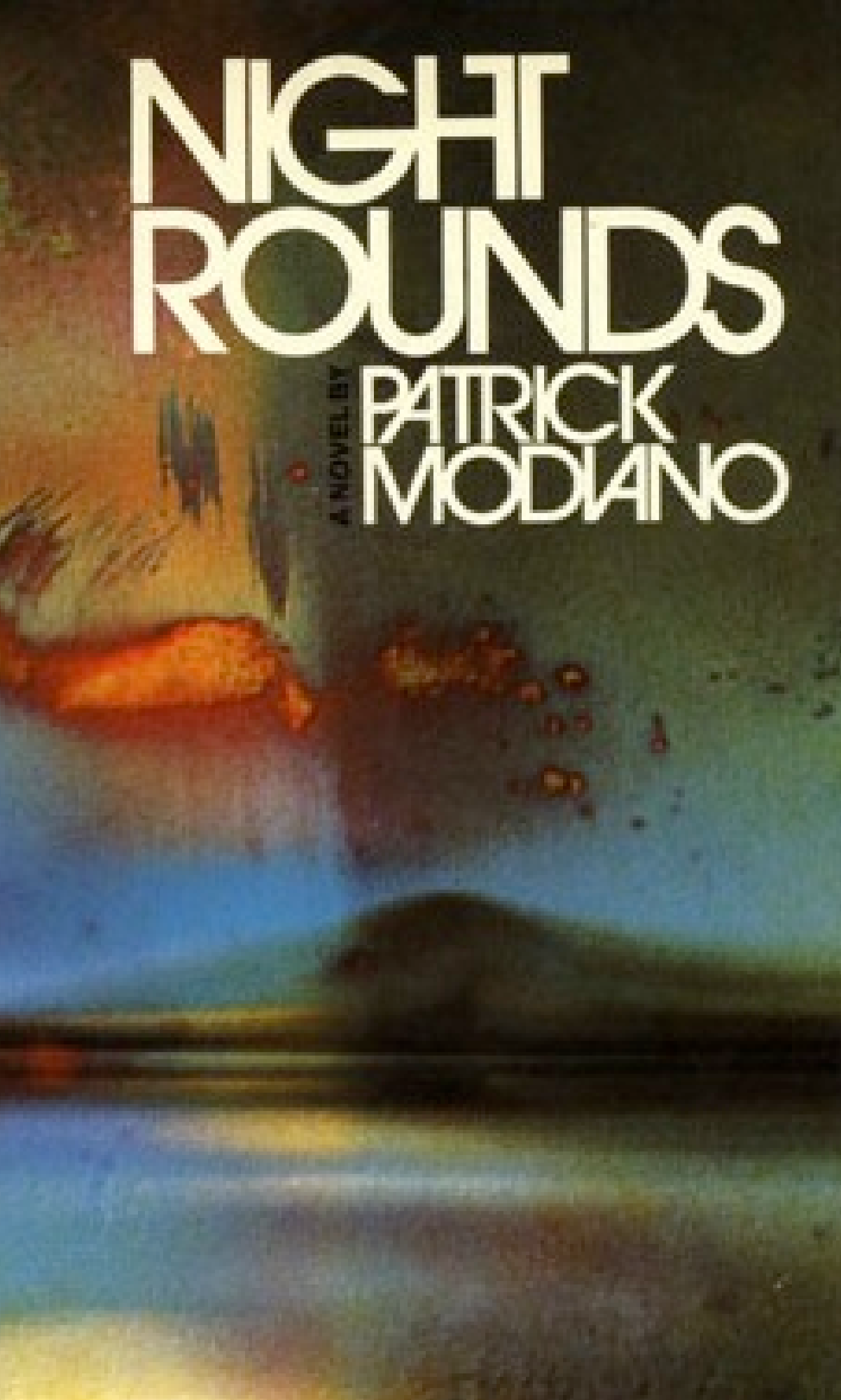
NIGHT ROUNDS

A NOVEL BY

PATRICK MODIANO



Night Rounds

LINGERING ROUNDS

Patrick Modiano

translated from the French by Patricia Wolf

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for Rudy Modiano

for Mother

Night Rounds

 aughter spilling into the night. The Khedive looked up.

"So you played mah-jongg while you waited for us?"

And he sends the ivory pieces scattering over the desk.

"Alone?" asks Mr. Philibert.

"Have you been waiting very long for us, son?"

Their voices are muffled to low whispers. Mr. Philibert smiles and gestures vaguely with one hand. The Khedive droops his head over his left shoulder and leaves it there, his cheek almost touching his shoulder. Like a marabou.

In the middle of the living room, a grand piano. Purple walls and draperies. Large vases filled with dahlias and orchids. The light from the chandeliers is dim, as in a bad dream.

"How about some relaxing music?" suggests Mr. Philibert.

"Soft music, that's what we need," announces Lionel de Zieff.

"Zwischen heute und morgen?" offers Count Baruzzi. "It's a fox trot."

"I'd rather have a tango," says Frau Sultana.

"Oh, yes, yes, please," begs Baroness Lydia Stahl.

"Du, du gehst an mir vorbei," Violette Morris murmurs plaintively.

The Khedive cuts it short: "Make it *Zwischen heute und morgen.*"

The women's make-up is much too heavy. The men

wear acid colors. Lionel de Zieff has on an orange suit and an ocher-striped shirt. Pols de Helder a yellow jacket and light-blue trousers, Count Baruzzi a dusty-green tuxedo. Several couples start to dance. Costachesco with Jean-Farouk de Méthode, Gaétan de Lussatz with Odicharvi, Simone Bouquereau with Irène de Tranzé. . . . Mr. Philibert stands alone, leaning against the window at the left. He shrugs when one of the Chapochnikoff brothers asks him to dance. The Khedive sits at the desk, whistling softly to himself and beating time.

"Why aren't you dancing, my boy?" he asks. "Nervous? Relax, there's no hurry. No hurry at all."

"You know," says Mr. Philibert, "police work is just endless patience." He goes over to the console table and picks up the pale-green leather-bound book lying there: *Anthology of Traitors from Alcibiades to Captain Dreyfus*. Leafing through it, he pulls out whatever he finds between the pages—letters, telegrams, calling cards, pressed flowers—and puts it on the desk. The Khedive seems intently interested in this investigation.

"Your bedside reading, son?"

Mr. Philibert hands him a photograph. The Khedive stares at it fixedly. Mr. Philibert has moved behind him. "His mother," murmurs the Khedive, pointing to the photograph. "Right, son? Your mother?" He repeats: "Your mother . . ." and two tears creep down his cheeks, creep to the corners of his mouth. Mr. Philibert has taken off his glasses. His eyes are wide open. He, too, is crying.

Just then, *Bei zärtlicher Musik* starts up. A tango, and they are cramped for space to dance. They jostle each other, some even stumble and slip on the parquet floor. "Don't you want to dance?" inquires Baroness Lydia Stahl. "Come on, save me the next rhumba." "Let him alone," mutters the Khedive. "He doesn't feel like dancing." "Just one rhumba, one rhumba," pleads the Baroness. "One rhumba, one rhumba!" shrieks Violette Morris. Under the light from the chandeliers, they are reddening, turning blue in the face, flushing to deep purple. Beads of perspiration trickle down their foreheads, their eyes bulge. Pols de Helder's face grows ashen as if it were burning up. Count Baruzzi's cheeks cave in, the rings under Rachid von Rosenheim's eyes puff out. Lionel de Zieff puts one hand to his heart. Costachesco and Odicharvi seem dazed. The women's make-up is crackling, their hair turning more and more violent colors. They are all decaying and will surely rot right where they are. Do they stink already?

"Let's make it brief and to the point, son," whispers the Khedive. "Have you contacted the man they call 'The Princess de Lamballe'? Who is he? Where can we find him?"

"Understand?" murmurs Mr. Philibert. "Henri wants information about the man they call 'The Princess de Lamballe.'"

The record has stopped. They are settling on the sofas and hassocks, in the armchairs. Méthode uncorks a bottle of cognac. The Chapochnikoff brothers leave the room

and reappear with trays of glasses. Lussatz fills them to the brim. "Let's have a toast, friends," suggests Hayakawa. "To the Khedive's health!" cries Costachesco. "To Inspector Philibert's," says Mickey de Voisins. "A toast to Madame de Pompadour," shrills Baroness Lydia Stahl. Their glasses chink. They drain them in one gulp.

"Lamballe's address," murmurs the Khedive. "Be a good fellow, sonny. Let's have Lamballe's address."

"You know we have the whip hand," whispers Mr. Philibert.

The others are conferring in low voices. The light from the chandeliers is fading, wavering between blue and deep purple. Faces are blurred. "The Hotel Blitz is getting more troublesome every day." "Don't worry, as long as I'm around you'll have the full backing of the embassy." "One word from Count Grafkreuz, my friend, and the Blitz's eyes are closed for good." "I'll ask Otto to help." "I'm very close to Dr. Best. Want me to speak to him?" "A call to Delfanne will settle everything." "We've got to be rough with our agents, otherwise they walk all over us." "No quarter!" "And we're covering them to boot!" "They ought to be grateful." "We're the ones who'll have to do the explaining, not they!" "They'll make out fine, you can bet! As for us . . . !" "They haven't heard the last from us." "The news from the front is excellent. EXCELLENT!"

"Henri wants Lamballe's address," Mr. Philibert repeats. "Make a real effort, son."

"I can understand your hesitation," says the Khedive. "This is what I have in mind: to start with, you tell us where we can find and arrest every member of the ring tonight."

"Just to get up steam," Mr. Philibert adds. "Then you'll find it easier to cough up Lamballe's address."

"The haul is set for tonight," whispers the Khedive. "We're waiting, son."

A yellow notebook purchased on the Rue Réaumur. You're a student? the saleswoman asked. (Everyone is interested in young people. The future is theirs; everyone wants to know their plans, inundates them with questions.) You need a flashlight to find the page. Can't see a thing in this dim light. You leaf through the notebook with your nose almost skimming the pages. The first address is in capital letters: the Lieutenant's, the ringleader's. You try to forget his deep blue eyes, the friendly way he says: "Everything O.K., kid?" You wish the Lieutenant were rotten to the core, a cheap, shoddy fraud. It would make things easier. But he hasn't a single flaw. As a last resort you think of the Lieutenant's ears. Just the reminder of this piece of cartilage is enough to make you want to vomit. How can human beings possess such monstrous excrescences? You picture the Lieutenant's ear, there, on the desk, larger than life, scarlet and laced with veins. And you quickly tell them where he will be that night: Place du Châtelet. The rest is easy. You give a dozen names and addresses without even opening the

notebook, like an earnest schoolboy reciting a fable of La Fontaine.

"Sounds like a good haul," comments the Khedive. He lights a cigarette, the tip of his nose tilted toward the ceiling, and blows smoke rings. Mr. Philibert has sat down at the desk and is leafing through the notebook. Probably checking the addresses.

The others go on talking among themselves. "Let's dance some more. My legs are asleep." "Soft music, that's what we need, soft music." "Name your choice, all of you! a rhumba!" *"Serenata ritmica." "So stell ich mir die Liebe vor." "Coco Seco." "Whatever Lola wants." "Guapo Fantoma." "No me dejes de querer."* "Why don't we play hide-and-seek?" Applause. "Great! Hide-and-seek!" They burst out laughing in the dark. Making it tremble.

Several hours earlier. La Grande Cascade restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne. The orchestra was torturing a Creole waltz. Two people had sat down at the table next to ours. An elderly man with a pearl-gray mustache and a white felt hat, an elderly lady in a dark-blue dress. The breeze swayed the Japanese lanterns hanging from the trees. Coco Lacour smoked his cigar. Esmeralda solemnly sipped a grenadine. They didn't talk. That was why I loved them. I would like to describe them in detail. Coco Lacour: a red-headed giant, his sightless eyes aglow at times with infinite sadness. Sometimes he hides them

behind dark glasses, and his heavy, faltering step makes him look like a sleepwalker. How old is Esmeralda? She's a wisp of a girl. I could tell all sorts of touching things about them, but I'm worn out, can't even try. Coco Lacour and Esmeralda, these names are enough, just as their silent presence beside me is enough. Esmeralda gazed in wide-eyed wonder at the brutes in the orchestra. Coco Lacour was smiling. I am their guardian angel. We'll come to the Bois de Boulogne each evening to enjoy the soft summer air. We'll enter this mysterious kingdom of lakes, wooded paths, and teahouses hidden amid the greenery. Nothing has changed here since we were children. Remember? You were rolling your hoop along the paths in the Pré Catelan. The breeze caught Esmeralda's hair. Her piano teacher told me she was doing well. She was learning the Beyer Method and would soon be playing some short pieces by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Coco Lacour lit a cigar, shyly, apologetically. I adore them. No trace of sentimentality in my love. I think to myself: if I were not around, they'd be trampled. Poor, weak creatures. Always silent. A word, a gesture is all it would take to break them. With me there, they have nothing to fear. Sometimes I feel like walking out on them. I would choose the perfect time. This evening, for instance. I'd get up and say, softly: "Wait, I'll be back in a minute." Coco Lacour would nod his head. Esmeralda's faint little smile. I'd have to take the first ten steps without turning back. The rest

would be easy. I'd run for the car and take off like a shot. The hardest part: not to loosen your grip in the few seconds just before strangulation. But nothing compares with the infinite relief you feel as the body relaxes and sinks down very slowly. The same holds true for bathtub torture and for the kind of treason that involves deserting someone in the night when you have promised to return. Esmeralda was playing with a straw. She blew into it, stirring up froth in her grenadine. Coco Lacour puffed on his cigar. Whenever I get that dizzying urge to leave them, I examine each of them closely, watching every movement they make, scrutinizing the expression on their faces the way you cling to a bridge railing. If I desert them, I will be alone as I was at the beginning. It's summertime, I told myself, reassuringly. Everyone will be back next month. It was summer, all right, but it dragged on in a peculiar way. Not a single car left in Paris. Not a single person on the street. Sometimes a tolling clock would break the silence. At a bend in a sunny avenue, the thought occurred to me that I was having a bad dream. Everyone had left Paris in July. In the evening they gathered for one last time at the outdoor cafés of the Champs Élysées and the Bois de Boulogne. In those moments I really tasted the sadness of summer. It's the season of fireworks. A whole world, on the verge of disappearing, sent up one final burst beneath the foliage and the Japanese lanterns. People jostled each other, spoke in loud voices, laughed, pinched each other nerv-

ously. You could hear the glasses breaking, car doors slamming. The exodus was beginning. During the day, I wander through this drifting city. Smoke rises from the chimneys: they're burning their old papers before moving out. They don't want to be burdened with useless baggage. Lines of cars stream toward the gates of Paris, and I, I sit on a bench. I would like to join their flight, but I have nothing to save. When they're gone, shadows will rise up and encircle me. I'll recognize a few faces. The women are too heavily made up, the men dress like fashionable blacks: alligator shoes, multicolored suits, platinum rings. Some of them even have a whole row of gold teeth on permanent display. Now I'm in the hands of some pretty low characters: the rats that take over a city after the plague has wiped out most of the population. They give me a police membership card, a gun permit and ask me to infiltrate a "ring" and destroy it. Ever since I was a child, I've made so many promises I broke, so many appointments I never kept, that it seemed like child's play to become a first-class traitor. "Wait, I'll be back . . ." All those faces seen for one last time before the night engulfs them . . . Some of them couldn't believe I would desert them. Others eyed me with an empty stare: "Say, are you coming back?" I remember, too, that queer tightening in my chest whenever I looked at my watch: they've been waiting for me for five, ten, twenty minutes. Maybe they haven't lost confidence yet. I wanted to rush off to meet them, and

the dizzy spell would last, on an average, about an hour. Informing on people is much quicker. Just a few seconds, time to reel off the names and addresses. Stool pigeon. I'll even become a killer if they want. I'll hunt down my victims with a silencer. Then I'll study their glasses, key rings, handkerchiefs, ties—modest objects that are meaningless to anyone but the wearer and which move me even more deeply than the faces of the dead. Before I kill them, I'll fasten my eyes on one of the humblest parts of their person: their shoes. It's a mistake to think that the flutter of hands, facial gestures, a look or a tone of voice are the only things that can move you at the first sight. For me, there is pathos in shoes. And when I feel remorse for killing them, I'll think of their shoes, not their smiles or their sterling qualities. Anyway, gutter-level police work pays off handsomely nowadays. I've got lots of money. It's useful for protecting Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. Without them I would really be alone. Sometimes I imagine they don't exist. I'm that red-headed blind man and that tiny defenseless little girl. Perfect excuse to feel sorry for myself. Wait a bit. The tears will come. I'll finally know the pleasures of Self-Pity—as the English Jews put it. Esmeralda smiled at me, Coco Lacour sucked on his cigar. The elderly man and the elderly lady in the dark-blue dress. Empty tables around us. Lanterns that someone forgot to put out. I was afraid, every second, of hearing their cars pull up on the gravel driveway. The doors would slam, they would

walk toward us slowly, lurching. Esmeralda was blowing soap bubbles and watching them float off, frowning. One of them popped against the elderly lady's cheek. The trees shivered. The orchestra took up a czardas, then a fox trot and a march. Soon you won't be able to tell what they're playing. The instruments are panting, gasping, and once more I see the face of that man they dragged into the living room with his hands strapped together. He was playing for time and, at first, set his face in a series of pleasant expressions as if trying to distract them. When his fear grew uncontrollable, he tried to arouse them: made eyes at them, bared his right shoulder with rapid, twitching jerks, went into a belly-dance, every inch of his body trembling. We mustn't stay here a minute longer. The music will die after one last spasm. The lanterns will go out.

"A game of blind man's buff?" "Fine idea!" "We won't need blindfolds." "It's dark enough." "You're it, Odicharvi!" "Scatter, everyone!"

They're tiptoeing about. You can hear them open the closet door. They're probably going to hide there. It sounds as if they're creeping around the desk. The floor's creaking. Someone's bumping into a piece of furniture. Someone else's profile is silhouetted against the window. Screams of laughter. Sighs. Frantic gestures. They must be running in all directions. "I've got you, Baruzzi!"

"Tough luck, I'm Helder." "Who's there?" "Guess!" "Rosenheim?" "No." "Costachesco?" "No." "Give up?"

"We'll arrest them tonight," declares the Khedive. "The Lieutenant and every member of the ring. EVERY LAST ONE. Those people are sabotaging our work."

"You still haven't given us Lamballe's address," murmurs Mr. Philibert. "When are you going to make up your mind, son? Come on now . . ."

"Give him a chance, Pierrot."

Suddenly the lights are on. They blink their eyes. There they are around the desk. "I'm parched." "Let's have a drink, friends, a drink!" "A song, Baruzzi, a song!" *"Il était un petit navire."* "Go on, Baruzzi, go on!" *"Qui n'avait ja-ja-ja-ja-mais navigué . . ."*

"Want to see my tattoos?" inquires Frau Sultana. She rips open her blouse. On each breast is a ship's anchor. Baroness Lydia Stahl and Violette Morris push her to the floor and finish undressing her. She struggles, eludes their embrace, and, giggling and squealing, entices them on. Violette Morris chases her across the living room where Zieff is sucking on a chicken wing in a corner. "Nothing like a tasty bite now that rationing is here to stay. Do you know what I just did? Stood in front of the mirror and plastered my face with pâté de foie gras! Foie gras at fifteen thousand francs a scoop!" (He bursts out laughing.) "Another cognac?" offers Pols de Helder. "You can't get it any more. A half-pint sells for a hundred

thousand francs. English cigarettes? I get them direct from Lisbon. Twenty thousand francs a pack."

"One of these days they'll address me as Police Commissioner," the Khedive announces crisply. And his gaze freezes into a vacant stare.

"To the Commissioner's health!" shouts Lionel de Zieff. He staggers and collapses onto the piano. The glass has slipped from his hand. Mr. Philibert thumbs through a dossier along with Paulo Hayakawa and Baruzzi. The Chapochnikoff brothers busy themselves around the victrola. Simone Bouquereau gazes at herself in the mirror.

Die Nacht
Die Musik
Und dein Mund

hums Baroness Lydia, doing a vague little dance step.

"Anyone for a session of sexuo-divine paneurhythmics?" whinnies Ivanoff the Oracle in his studhorse tenor.

The Khedive eyes them mournfully. "They'll address me as Commissioner." His voice rises sharply: "Police Commissioner!" He hammers his fist on the desk. The others pay no attention to this outburst. He gets up and opens the left-hand window a little. "Come sit here, my boy, I like to have you around. Such a sensitive fellow. So receptive. You soothe my nerves."

Zieff is snoring on the piano. The Chapochnikoff broth-

ers have stopped playing the victrola. They are examining the vases of flowers one by one, straightening an orchid, stroking the petals of a dahlia. Now and then they turn and dart frightened glances at the Khedive. Simone Bouquereau seems fascinated by her face in the mirror. Her violet eyes widen, her skin slowly turns ashen pale. Violette Morris has taken a seat on the velvet sofa next to Frau Sultana. The palms of their white hands lie open to Ivanoff's scrutiny.

"The price of tungsten has gone up," Baruzzi announces. "I can get you a good deal on it. I'm on the best of terms with Guy Max in the purchasing office on Rue Villejust."

"I thought he only handled textiles," says Mr. Philibert.

"He's changed his line," says Hayakawa. "Sold all of his stock to Macias-Reoyo."

"Maybe you'd rather have hides?" asks Baruzzi. "Calfskins have gone up a hundred francs."

"Odicharvi mentioned three tons of worsted he wants to get rid of. I thought of you, Philibert."

"How about thirty-six thousand decks of cards I can have delivered to you by morning? You'll get the top price for them. Now's the time. They launched their *Schwerpunkt* attack at the beginning of the month."

Ivanoff is examining the Marquise's palm.

"Quiet!" shouts Violette Morris. "The Oracle is reading her future. Quiet!"

"What do you think of that, son?" the Khedive asks

me. "Ivanoff rules the women with a rod. His famous lighter-than-iron rod! They can't do without him. Mystics, dear boy. And he thrives on it! The old clown!" He rests his elbows on the edge of the balcony. Below, there's one of those tranquil squares you find in the 16th *arrondissement*. The street lights cast an odd blue glow on the foliage and the music pavilion. "Did you know, son, before the war the house we're in used to belong to M. de Bel-Respiro." (His voice sounds hollow.) "I found some letters in a closet that he wrote his wife and children. A real family man. Look, there he is." He points to a life-sized portrait hanging between the two windows. "M. de Bel-Respiro himself in his Algerian Spahi officer's uniform. With all those decorations! There's a model Frenchman for you!"

"A square mile of rayon?" offers Baruzzi. "You can have it dirt cheap. Five tons of crackers? The freight cars are tied up at the Spanish border. You won't have any trouble getting an exit pass. I'm only asking a small commission, Philibert."

The Chapochnikoff brothers slink around the Khedive, not daring to speak to him. Zieff is asleep with his mouth open. Frau Sultana and Violette Morris hang on Ivanoff's every word: astral flux . . . sacred pentagram . . . grains of sustenance from the Earth Mother . . . great telluric waves . . . incantatory paneurhythmics . . . Betelgeuse . . . But Simone Bouquereau presses her forehead up against the mirror.

"I'm not interested in any of these financial deals," Mr. Philibert cuts in.

Disappointed, Baruzzi and Hayakawa tango their way over to Lionel de Zieff's chair and pat his shoulder to waken him. Mr. Philibert thumbs through a dossier, pencil in hand.

"You see, my dear boy," the Khedive resumes (really, he looks as if he's on the verge of tears), "I've had no education. I was alone when they buried my father and I spent the night on his grave. It was bitter cold, too, that night. At fourteen, the prison colony at Eysses . . . penal battalion, overseas . . . Fresnes prison. . . . No chance to meet decent people, just washouts like myself . . . Life. . . ."

"Wake up, Lionel!" shouts Hayakawa.

"We've got something important to tell you," adds Baruzzi.

"We'll get you fifteen thousand trucks and two tons of nickel for a 15 per cent commission." Zieff blinks his eyes and mops his forehead with a light-blue handkerchief. "Anything you say, as long as I can cram my belly full of it. Don't you think I've filled out nicely these last two months? Feels good, now that rationing is here to stay." He lumbers over to the sofa and slides his hand into Frau Sultana's blouse. She struggles and slaps him as hard as she can. Ivanoff sneers faintly. "Anything you say, boys," Zieff repeats in a grating voice. "Anything you say." "O.K. for tomorrow morning, Lionel?" asks Hayakawa.

"Can I confirm it with Schiedlausky? We'll throw in a carload of rubber as a bonus."

Sitting at the piano, Mr. Philibert pensively fingers a few notes.

"Still, my boy," resumes the Khedive, "I've always hungered for respectability. Please don't confuse me with the people here. . . ."

Simone Bouquereau is putting on her make-up in front of the mirror. Violette Morris and Frau Sultana have closed their eyes. The Oracle, apparently, is invoking the stars. The Chapochnikoff brothers hover around the piano. One of them is winding up the metronome, another hands a sheet of music to Mr. Philibert.

"Take Lionel de Zieff," whispers the Khedive. "What I couldn't tell you about that swindler! and about Baruzzi! or Hayakawa! Every last one of them! Ivanoff? a filthy blackmailer! Baroness Lydia Stahl is a high-priced whore!"

Mr. Philibert leafs through the music. From time to time he drums out the rhythm. The Chapochnikoff brothers glance at him fearfully.

"So you see, my boy," the Khedive continues, "all the rats have profited from recent 'events' to come out into the open. I myself . . . But that's another story. Don't trust appearances. Before long I'll be inviting the most respectable people in Paris into this living room. They'll address me as Commissioner! POLICE COMMISSIONER, get that?" He turns around and points to the life-sized por-

trait. "There I am! A Spahi officer! Look at those decorations! Legion of Honor. Cross of the Holy Sepulcher. Cross of St. George of Russia. Order of Danilo de Monténégro, Portugal's Tower and Sword. Why should I envy M. de Bel-Respiro? I'll have him dangling on a string!"

He clicks his heels.

Sudden silence.

That's a waltz Philibert is playing. The cascade of notes pauses hesitantly, unfolds, and gushes over the dahlias and the orchids. Mr. Philibert sits very straight. His eyes are closed.

"Hear that, my boy?" asks the Khedive. "Look at those hands! Pierre can play for hours without letting up. Never gets cramps. An artist!"

Frau Sultana's head is nodding a little. The opening chords have roused her from her apathy. Violette Morris gets up and waltzes, with icy composure, the length of the living room. Paulo Hayakawa and Baruzzi have stopped talking. The Chapochnikoff brothers listen with mouths agape. Even Zieff seems hypnotized by Mr. Philibert's hands as they begin racing over the keyboard. Ivanoff, chin outstretched, scans the ceiling. But Simone Bouquereau finishes putting on her make-up in the Venetian mirror, as if nothing had happened.

He strikes the chords with all of his strength, bending low over the keys, his eyes shut. His playing becomes more and more impassioned.

"Like it, son?" asks the Khedive.

Mr. Philibert has slammed the piano shut. He rises, rubbing his hands, and walks toward the Khedive. After a pause:

"We just nailed someone, Henri. Passing out leaflets. We caught him in the act. Breton and Reocreux are going over him in the cellar."

The others are still stunned by the stifled waltz: silent and motionless, magnetized by the music.

"I was talking to him about you, Pierre," murmurs the Khedive. "Telling him that you're a sensitive chap, a melomaniac in a class by yourself, an artist . . ."

"Thanks, Henri. It's true, but I hate big words. You should have told him I'm a policeman, first and last."

"Number One cop in France! According to a cabinet minister!"

"That was long ago, Henri."

"In those days, Pierre, I would have been afraid of you. Inspector Philibert! Wow! When I'm police commissioner, I'll make you my chief deputy."

"Shut up!"

"Still love me?"

A scream. Then two. Then three. Piercing. Mr. Philibert glances at his watch. "Three quarters of an hour already. He must be ready to break. I'll go see." The Chapochnikoff brothers trail after him. The others, apparently, heard nothing.

"You're gorgeous," says Paulo Hayakawa to Baroness Lydia, offering her a glass of champagne. "Really?" Frau

Sultana and Ivanoff are gazing into each other's eyes. Baruzzi sneaks up behind Simone Bouquereau, but Zieff trips him. Baruzzi topples a vase of dahlias as he falls. "Out to play the ladies' man? Not going to pay attention any more to his nice big Lionel?" He bursts out laughing and fans himself with his light-blue handkerchief.

"It's the fellow they picked up," murmurs the Khedive, "the one who was handing out leaflets. They're working on him. He won't last, son. Want to see him?" "To the Khedive's health!" shouts Lionel de Zieff. "To Inspector Philibert's!" adds Paulo Hayakawa, stroking the Baroness' neck. A scream. Then two. A sob that lingers on.

"Talk or die!" bellows the Khedive.

The others pay no attention at all. Except Simone Bouquereau, who was putting on her make-up in the mirror. She turns around. Her huge violet eyes are devouring her face. There's a smear of lipstick on her chin.

For a few minutes longer we heard the music. It died away just as we reached the Cascades crossroad. I was driving. Coco Lacour and Esmeralda were in the front seat. We glided along the road that borders the Lakes. Hell begins at the edge of the woods: Boulevard Lannes, Boulevard Flandrin, Avenue Henri-Martin. This is the most intimidating residential section in the whole of Paris. The silence that used to reign there in the evening, after eight o'clock, was almost reassuring. A middle-class

silence of felt, of velvet and good manners. You could picture the families gathered in the drawing room after dinner. Now, there's no telling what goes on behind the high dark walls. Once in a while a car passed us with all its lights out. I was afraid it would stop and block our way.

We took the Avenue Henri-Martin. Esmeralda was dozing. After eleven o'clock, little girls have a hard time keeping their eyes open. Coco Lacour was fiddling with the dashboard, spinning the radio knob. Neither of them had any idea how fragile their happiness was. Only I was bothered by it. We were three children making our way through ominous shadows in a big automobile. And if there happened to be a light at any window, I wouldn't rely on it. I know the district well. The Khedive used to have me search through private houses and confiscate objects of art: Second Empire houses, eighteenth-century "country retreats," turn-of-the-century buildings with stained-glass windows, pseudo-Gothic châteaux. Their sole occupant now was a terrified caretaker, forgotten by the owner in his flight. I'd ring the doorbell, show my police card and inspect the premises. I remember long walks: Ranelagh–La Muette–Auteuil, this was my route. I'd sit on a bench in the shade of the chestnut trees. Not a soul on the streets. I could enter any house in the area. The city was mine.

Place du Trocadéro. Coco Lacour and Esmeralda at my side, those two staunch companions. Mama used to tell me: "The friends you have are the ones you deserve."

To which I'd reply that men are much too talkative for my taste and that I can't stand the swarms of word-flies that come out of their mouths. It gives me a headache. Makes me gasp for breath—and I'm short of it to begin with. The Lieutenant, for instance, can talk your ears limp. Each time I walk into his office, he gets up and starts off with "my young friend," or "my boy." And the words come pouring out in a frenzied stream, so he doesn't even have time to really pronounce them. The verbal torrent subsides, briefly, only to inundate me the next minute. His voice grows more and more shrill. At length he's screeching, and the words choke in his throat. He stamps his feet, waves his arms, heaves about, hiccups, suddenly turns morose and begins speaking again in a monotone. His final advice is: "Guts, my boy!" which he says in an exhausted whisper.

At first he said to me: "I need you. We've got serious work to do. I stay in the shadows with my men. Your mission: to work yourself in among our enemies. To report back, with all possible caution, what those bastards are up to." He made crystal clear to me the gulf between us: purity and heroism fell to him and his staff. To me, the dirty job of spy and informer. That night, as I read over the *Anthology of Traitors from Alcibiades to Captain Dreyfus,* it occurred to me that after all double-dealing and—why not?—treason suited my peculiar nature. Not enough backbone for a hero. Too detached and too easily distracted to be a real villain. On the other

hand, adaptable, restless, and plainly good-natured.

We were driving back along Avenue Kléber. Coco Lacour yawned. Esmeralda was asleep with her little head rocking against my shoulder. It was time for them to be in bed. Avenue Kléber. That other night we had taken the same route after leaving L'Heure Mauve, a night club on the Champs Élysées. A rather listless crowd lounged around the red velvet tables and the bar stools: Lionel de Zieff, Costachesco, Lussatz, Méthode, Frau Sultana, Odicharvi, Lydia Stahl, Otto da Silva, the Chapochnikoff brothers . . . Warm, moist twilight. Scents of Egypt floating on the air. Yes, there were still a few islands in Paris where people tried to ignore "the disaster that has lately occurred" and where you could find a stagnant pre-war spirit of zestful living and frivolity. Contemplating all those faces, I repeated to myself a phrase I had read somewhere: "Brash adventurism that reeks of betrayal and murder."

Close to the bar a victrola was playing:

Bonsoir
Jolie Madame
Je suis venu
Vous dire bonsoir . . .

The Khedive and Mr. Philibert led me outside. A white Bentley waited at the foot of Rue Marbeuf. They got in next to the chauffeur and I sat in the back seat. The

street lights were spewing their silent streams of bluish light.

"Don't worry," the Khedive said, pointing to the driver. "Eddy has eyes like a cat."

"Right now," Mr. Philibert said to me, taking my arm, "a young man has all sorts of opportunities. Everyone has to look out for himself, and I'm ready to help you, my boy. We're living in dangerous times. Your hands are white and slender, your health isn't the best. Take care. If you want my advice, don't try to be a hero. Take it easy. Work with us. It's as simple as this: martyrdom or the sanatorium." "A fast little finger job, for instance—wouldn't that interest you?" the Khedive asked me. "Handsomely rewarded," added Mr. Philibert. "And absolutely legal. We'll furnish you with a police card and a gun permit." "We want you to infiltrate an underground ring so we can break it up. You'll keep us informed about the activities of those gentlemen." "If you're at all careful, they won't suspect you." "I think you inspire confidence." "And you'll get what you want for the asking—you've got a winning smile." "And lovely eyes, my boy!" "Traitors always have a steady eye." Their words were coming faster. At the end I had the feeling that they were talking at once. Those blue butterflies swarming out of their mouths. . . . Anything they want —stool-pigeon, hired killer, anything—if they'll only shut up once in a while and let me sleep. Squealer, traitor, killer, butterflies . . .

"We're taking you to our new headquarters," Mr. Philibert decided. "It's a private house at 3 *bis* Cimarosa Square." "We're having a housewarming," added the Khedive. "With all our friends." *"Home, Sweet Home,"* hummed Mr. Philibert.

As I entered the living room, the haunting phrase came back to me: "Brash adventurism that reeks of betrayal and murder." The usual crowd was there. New faces turned up every few moments: Danos, Codébo, Reocreux, Vital-Léca, Robert le Pale . . . The Chapochnikoff brothers poured champagne for them. "Let's have a little talk," the Khedive whispered to me. "What's on your mind? You're white as a ghost. Want a drink?" He handed me a glass of some pink liquid. "Look here," he said to me, opening the French doors and leading me onto the balcony, "as of today I'm master of an empire. Not just an auxiliary police force. We're going to handle a tremendous business! Over five hundred agents in our pay! Philibert will help me with the administrative side. I've put to good account the extraordinary events we've been through these past few months." The heat was so bad it fogged the living-room windows. They gave me another glass of pink liquid, which I drank, stifling an urge to retch. "So"—he was stroking my cheek with the back of his hand—"you can give me advice, guide me once in a while. I've had no education." His voice was trailing off. "At fourteen, the prison colony at Eysses, then the overseas penal battalion, consigned to oblivion. . . . But I'm

starved for respectability, understand?" His eyes blazed. Savagely: "One of these days I'll be police commissioner. They'll address me as COMMISSIONER!" He hammers both fists on the balcony railing: "COMMISSIONER . . . COMMIS-SION-ER!" and his eyes glaze over in a vacant stare.

Down on the square, a misty vapor rose from the trees. I wanted to leave, but it was too late, most likely. He'd grasp my wrist, and even if I managed to slip free I'd have to cross the living room, clear a path through those tightly clustered groups, withstand an assaulting horde of buzzing wasps. Vertigo. Great luminous circles whirled around me, faster and faster, and my heart was bursting.

"Feel queasy?" He takes me by the arm and leads me over to the sofa. The Chapochnikoff brothers—how many of them are there, anyway?—were scurrying every which way. Count Baruzzi took a stack of money out of a black briefcase to show to Frau Sultana. A little further away, Rachid von Rosenheim, Paulo Hayakawa, and Odicharvi were talking excitedly. There were others, but I couldn't make them out. All of them, because of their incessant chatter, their abrupt gestures, and the heavy odors they exuded, seemed to be dissolving on the spot. Mr. Philibert handed me a green card with a red stripe across it. "From now on you're a member of the Service; I signed you up under the name 'Swing Troubadour.'" They all drew around me, waving champagne glasses. "To Swing Troubadour!" Lionel de Zieff hailed me and burst out laughing

until his face turned purple. "To Swing Troubadour!" shrilled Baroness Lydia.

At that moment—if I remember correctly—I had a sudden urge to cough. I saw Mama's face again. She was bending over me and whispering in my ear, just as she used to do every night before she turned off the light: "You'll end up on the gallows!" "To your health, Swing Troubadour!" murmured one of the Chapochnikoff brothers, and he touched my shoulder timidly. The others pressed around me, stuck to me, like flies.

Avenue Kléber. Esmeralda is talking in her sleep. Coco Lacour is rubbing his eyes. It's time for them to go to bed. Neither of them has any idea how fragile their happiness is. Of the three of us, I'm the only one who's worried.

"I'm sorry you had to hear those screams, my boy," says the Khedive. "I don't like violence either, but that fool was passing out leaflets. It's a serious matter."

Simone Bouquereau is gazing at herself once again in the mirror, touching up her face. The others, in a relaxed mood, lapse into a kind of easy conviviality wholly appropriate to the setting. We are in a middle-class living room, after dinner, when the liqueurs are handed round.

"Have a drink to cheer you up," suggests the Khedive.

"The 'confused period' we're living in," comments Ivanoff the Oracle, "acts as an aphrodisiac on women."

"Most people must have forgotten the aroma of cognac,

now that rationing's here to stay," sneers Lionel de Zieff. "Their tough luck!" "What do you expect?" murmurs Ivanoff. "With the whole world out of kilter . . . but that doesn't mean I'm profiting from it, my dear fellow. Ideals are what count for me."

"Calfskin . . ." begins Pols de Helder.

"A carload of tungsten . . ." Baruzzi joins in.

"And a 25 per cent rebate," Jean-Farouk de Méthode adds pointedly.

Mr. Philibert, solemn-faced, enters the living room and approaches the Khedive.

"We're leaving in fifteen minutes, Henri. First stop: the Lieutenant, Place du Châtelet. Then the other ring members at their respective addresses. A fine haul! The young man will go with us. Right, Swing Troubadour? Get ready! Fifteen minutes!" "A cognac for courage, Troubadour?" offers the Khedive. "And don't forget to come up with Lamballe's address," adds Mr. Philibert. "Understand?"

One of the Chapochnikoff brothers—but how many of them are there, anyway?—stands in the center of the room, a violin poised under his chin. He clears his throat and begins to sing in a magnificent bass:

Nur
Nicht
Aus Liebe weinen . . .
(Don't weep just for love's sake)

The others clap to the beat. The player scrapes the strings ever so slowly, quickens his bowing, quickens it further. . . . The music comes faster and faster.

Aus Liebe . . .
(For love)

Luminous circles are expanding as from a stone cast into the water. They began by spiraling out from the violinist's feet . . . now they have reached the living-room walls.

Es gibt auf
Erden . . .
(There is on earth)

The singer is breathless and seems likely to choke after one last note. The bow races over the strings in a new burst of speed. Will they be able to keep the tempo much longer with their clapping?

Auf dieser Welt . . .
(In this world)

The living room is spinning round and round now. Only the violinist remains stationary.

nicht nur den Einen . . .
(There is not just one)

As a child, you were always frightened in those whirling contraptions that go faster and faster and are called "caterpillars." Remember . . .

Es gibt so viele . . .
(There are so many)

You used to howl, but it was no use. The caterpillar kept on whirling.

Es gibt so viele . . .

You insisted on getting into those caterpillars. Why?

Ich lüge auch . . .
(I lie too)

They stand up, clapping . . . The living room is whirling, whirling. It almost seems to be tipping. They'll lose their balance. The vases of flowers will be smashed on the floor. The violinist sings in urgent tones.

Ich lüge auch

You howled, but it was no use. No one could hear you above the hubbub of the fair.

Es muss ja Lüge sein . . .
(It has to be a lie)

The Lieutenant's face. Ten, twenty other faces there's no time to identify. The living room is whirling much too fast, like the caterpillar called "Sirocco" in Luna Park.

den ich gewählt . . .
(The one I chose)

After five minutes it was whirling so fast you couldn't recognize the faces of those who stayed below, watching.

Heute dir gehören . . .
(Today belongs to you)

Still, as you swept past, occasionally you could pick out a nose, a hand, a laugh, a set of teeth, or a pair of staring eyes. The Lieutenant's deep blue eyes. Ten, twenty other faces. Those whose addresses you just gave and who will be arrested tonight. Luckily, they rush by in time with the music and you don't have a chance to assemble their features.

und Liebe schwören . . .
(And vows his love)

His voice races on even faster, he clutches his violin with the haggard look of a castaway . . .

Ich liebe jeden . . .
(I love them all)

The others clap, clap, clap. Their cheeks are distended, their eyes wild, they will all surely die of a stroke . . .

Ich lüge auch . . .
(I lie too)

The Lieutenant's face. Ten, twenty other faces whose features are now discernible. They are about to be arrested. They seem to be calling you to account. For a few minutes you aren't the least bit sorry for giving their addresses. Caught in the fearless stare of these heroes, you're even tempted to scream out at the top of your lungs just what you are: a stool pigeon. But, inch by inch, the glaze on their faces chips away, their arrogance pales, and the conviction that glistened in their eyes vanishes like the flame of a snuffed-out candle. A tear makes its way down the cheek of one of them. Another lowers his head and glances at you sadly. Still another stares at you dazedly, as if he didn't expect that from you. . . .

Als ihr bleicher Leib im Wasser . . .
(As her pale corpse in the water)

Their faces rotate, very slowly. They murmur gentle reproaches as they pass. Then, while they're still turning, their faces contract, they ignore you now, and their eyes and their mouths convey a hideous fear. Surely they're thinking of what's in store for them. They've become like

those children who cry out for mama in the dark. . . .

Von den Bächen in die grösseren Flüsse . . .
(From the brooks into the greater streams)

You recall all the nice things they did for you. One of them used to read you his girl's letters.

Als ihr bleicher Leib im Wasser . . .
(As her pale corpse in the water)

Another wore black leather shoes. Another could name every star in the sky. REMORSE. These faces will go on turning forever and you'll never sleep soundly again. But something the Lieutenant said comes back to you: "The guys in my outfit are tough as they come. They'll die if they have to, but you won't wring a word from them." All the better. Once more their faces turn to stone. The Lieutenant's deep blue eyes. Ten, twenty other faces laden with scorn. If they want to die like heroes, let them die!

Aus der Flüssen in das Meer . . .
(From the rivers to the sea)

He is silent. He has propped his violin against the mantel. The others gradually quiet down. A kind of languor envelops them. They sprawl over the sofa and arm-

chairs. "You're white as a sheet, son," murmurs the Khedive. "Don't worry. The roundup will be handled in a perfectly tidy way."

It's pleasant to be out on a balcony in the open air and, for a moment, to forget that room where the scent of flowers, the chatter, and the music were making your head churn. A summer night, so soft and still that you think you're in love.

"Of course, we have all the earmarks of gangsters. The men I use, the brutal tactics, the fact that we took you on as an informer, you with your pretty little Christ Child dimples; none of this speaks well for us, unfortunately . . ."

The trees and the kiosk in the square are bathed in a reddish glow. "And this odd segment of humanity that gravitates toward what I call our little 'drugstore': swindlers, demimondaines, cashiered police officers, drug addicts, nightclub owners, in short, this whole string of marquises, counts, barons, and princesses that you won't find in the social register . . ."

Down below, edging the curb, a line of cars. Theirs. Dark blots in the night.

"I'm well aware that all this could be rather distasteful to a well-bred young man. But"—his voice takes on a savage edge—"if you're among people as disreputable as these tonight, it means, in spite of your little choir-boy mug . . ." (Very tenderly.) "It simply means, dear fellow, that we're cut from the same cloth."

The light from the chandeliers is burning their faces, corroding them like acid. Their features grow cavernous, their skin shrivels, their heads will surely shrink to miniature, like those the Jívaro Indians prize. An odor of flowers and withered flesh. Soon, the only trace of this gathering will be the tiny bubbles that burst on the surface of a pond. They're already wallowing in muddy-pink sludge, and it's rising, it's knee-deep. They don't have long to live.

"This party's getting dull," announces Lionel de Zieff.

"It's time to go," says Mr. Philibert. "First stop: Place du Châtelet. The Lieutenant!"

"Coming, son?" asks the Khedive. Outside, the blackout, as usual. They split up at random and enter the cars. "Place du Châtelet!" "Place du Châtelet!" The doors slam. They're off like a shot. "No passing, Eddy!" orders the Khedive. "The sight of all these fine fellows cheers me up."

"And to think that we're keeping this pack of riff-raff!" sighs Mr. Philibert. "Bear with it, Pierre. We're in business with them. They're our partners. For better or worse."

Avenue Kléber. Their horns are blaring, their arms hang out the car windows, waving, flapping. They weave and tailgate, their bumpers grazing. They're out to see who'll take the wildest risks, make the loudest noise in the blackout. Champs Élysées. Concorde. Rue de Rivoli. "We're headed for a section I know like a book," says

the Khedive. "Les Halles, where I spent my teens unloading vegetable carts."

The others have disappeared. The Khedive smiles and lights a cigarette with his solid gold lighter. Rue de Castiglione. The Obelisk in the Place Vendôme, just barely visible on the left. Place des Pyramides. The car slows down gradually, as if approaching the border. Beyond the Rue du Louvre, the city suddenly seems to cave in.

"We're entering the 'belly of Paris,'" comments the Khedive. Though the car windows are shut, a stench, unbearable at first and then by degrees more tolerable, makes you want to retch. They must have converted Les Halles into a slaughterhouse.

"The belly of Paris," repeats the Khedive.

The car glides along slippery pavements. The hood is getting all spattered. Mud? Blood? Whatever it is, it's something warm.

We cross Boulevard Sébastopol and come onto a vast open tract. All the surrounding houses have been razed; the only vestiges are wall beams with shreds of wallpaper. From the little left standing, you can picture the location of the stairs, the fireplaces, the closets. And the size of the rooms. Where the bed stood. Here's where a boiler used to be. There, a sink. Some people preferred flowered wallpaper, others a version of toile de Jouy. I even thought I saw a colored print still hanging on the wall.

Place du Châtelet. Zelly's, the bar where the Lieutenant and Saint-Georges are supposed to meet me at midnight. What kind of expression shall I put on when they come walking up to me? The others are already seated at tables as the Khedive, Philibert, and I enter. They swarm around us, each trying to be the first to shake our hands. They clutch at us, squeeze and shake us. Some of them smother us with kisses, others caress our necks, still others tug playfully at our lapels. I recognize Jean-Farouk de Méthode, Violette Morris, and Frau Sultana. "How are you?" Costachesco asks me. We push our way through the crowd that has gathered. Baroness Lydia pulls me over to a table occupied by Rachid von Rosenheim, Pols de Helder, Count Baruzzi, and Lionel de Zieff. "Have a cognac?" offers Pols de Helder. "You can't get any more of it in Paris, it sells for a hundred thousand francs a half-pint. Drink up!" He crams the neck of the bottle into my mouth. Then von Rosenheim shoves a cigarette between my lips and flourishes a platinum lighter set with emeralds. The light grows dim, their gestures and voices fade into soft, shadowy stillness, whereupon surging up before me with vivid clarity comes the face of the Princess de Lamballe, a devoted friend of Marie Antoinette's whom a company of "garde nationale" has come to fetch from La Force prison: "Rise, Madam, you must go to the Abbaye." Their pikes and leering faces are right in front of me. Why didn't she shout "LONG LIVE THE NATION!" just as they wanted her to? It would have

kept her head from decorating a pike beneath the Queen's window. If one of them pricks my forehead with his pike-head (Zieff? Hayakawa? Rosenheim? Philibert? the Khedive?), that single drop of blood is all it will take to bring the sharks rushing in. Don't move a muscle. Shout it as many times as they want: "LONG LIVE THE NATION!" Strip off your clothes if necessary. Whatever they want! One more minute, Headsman. No matter what the price. Rosenheim shoves another cigarette into my mouth. The condemned man's last? Apparently the execution is not set for tonight. Costachesco, Zieff, Helder, and Baruzzi are exceedingly friendly. They're worried about my health. Have I enough cash? Of course I do. The act of delivering over the Lieutenant and his whole ring will net me about a hundred thousand francs, and with that I'll buy a few foulards at Charvet and a vicuña coat for the winter. Unless they settle my hash in the meantime. It seems that cowards invariably die a degrading death. The doctor used to tell me that every person about to die becomes a music box playing the melody that best describes his life, his character, and his hopes. For some, it's a popular waltz; for others, a march. Still another wails a gypsy air trailing off in a sob or a cry of panic. When it's YOUR turn, precious boy, it will be the clang of a trash can clattering into the blackness of no man's land. And just a while back, when we were crossing that open space on the far side of the Boulevard Sébastopol, I thought: "Here's where your story will

end." I remember the gentle slope of the road that brought me to the spot, one of the most desolate in Paris. Everything begins in the Bois de Boulogne. Remember? You were rolling your hoop on the lawn in the Pré Catelan. The years pass, you skirt the Avenue Henri-Martin and wind up in the Trocadéro. Then Place de l'Étoile. An avenue stretches out, lined with glittering street lights. Like a vision of the future, you think: full of promise—as the saying goes. You're breathless with exhilaration on the threshold of this vast thoroughfare, but it's only the Champs-Élysées with its cosmopolitan bars, its call girls and the Claridge, a caravansary haunted by the specter of Stavisky. Dreariness of the Lido. Dismal ports of call, Fouquet and the Colisée. Everything was phony from the start. Place de la Concorde, you're sporting lizard shoes, a polka-dot tie, and the smug assurance of a little gigolo. After turning off into the Madeleine-Opéra district, just as tawdry as the Champs-Élysées, you continue your journey and what the doctor calls your MOR–AL DIS–IN–TE–GRA–TION beneath the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli. The Continental, the Meurice, the Saint-James et d'Albany, where I work as a hotel thief. The wealthy guests occasionally have me up to their rooms. Before it's light, I rifle their handbags and lift a few pieces of jewelry. Farther along. Rumpelmayer's, with its odors of withered flesh. The fags you assault at night in the Carrousel gardens just to filch suspenders and wallets. But the vision suddenly looms clearer: I'm right in the

belly of Paris. Where exactly are its borders? All you have to do is cross the Rue du Louvre or the Place du Palais Royal. You head toward Les Halles down narrow, fetid streets. The belly of Paris is a jungle striped with motley neon signs. All around you, overturned vegetable crates and ghostly figures wheeling giant haunches of carcass. A cluster of wan and weirdly painted faces surge up, then vanish. From here on, anything is possible. They'll rope you into the dirtiest jobs before letting you have the final payoff. And if, by some desperate, cunning subterfuge, one more last-ditch act of cowardice, you wriggle clear of this horde of foul-mouthed fishwives and butchers lurking in the shadows, you'll go on to die just up the street, on the far side of the Boulevard Sébastopol, right there in that vacant lot. That wasteland. The doctor said so. You've reached your journey's end, and there's no turning back. Too late. The trains aren't running. Our Sunday walks along the Petite Ceinture, the railway line that's idle now . . . It took us in full circle around Paris. Porte de Clignancourt. Boulevard Pereire. Porte Dauphine. Farther on, Javel . . . The stations along the loop had been converted into depots or bars. Some of them had been left intact, and I could almost picture a train coming by any minute, yet for the last fifty years the hands of the clock have never moved. I've always had a special feeling about the Gare d'Orsay, to the point that I wait there for the pale blue Pullmans that speed you to the Promised Land. And since they

never appear, I walk across the Pont Solferino whistling a waltz tune. Then I take from my wallet a photograph of Dr. Marcel Petiot in the defense box and, behind him, that whole pile of suitcases crammed with hopes and thwarted plans, while the judge, pointing to them, asks me: "What have you made of your youth?" and my attorney (my mother, as it happened, for no one else would undertake my defense) tries to convince him and the jury that I was "nonetheless a promising youngster," "an ambitious lad," slated for a "brilliant career," so everyone said. "The proof, Your Honor, is that the luggage, over there behind him, is impeccable. Russia leather, Your Honor." "Why should I give a damn about those suitcases, Madame, since they never went anywhere?" And every last one of them condemned me to death. Tonight, you must go to bed early. Tomorrow the whorehouse will be packed solid. Don't forget your make-up and lipstick. Rehearse it once more in the mirror: you must wink your eye with velvety smoothness. You'll run across a lot of perverts who'll want you to do unspeakable things. Those depraved creatures frighten me. If I don't satisfy them, they'll wipe me out. Why didn't she shout: "LONG LIVE THE NATION"? When it's my turn, I'll repeat it as often as they want. I'm the most accommodating whore. "Come on now, drink up," Zieff pleads with me. "Some music?" suggests Violette Morris. The Khedive comes over to me, smiling: "The Lieutenant will be here in ten minutes. Say hello to him as if nothing

were up." "Something romantic," Frau Sultana requests. "RO–MAN–TIC," shouts Baroness Lydia. "Then try to take him outside the bar." *"Negra noche,* please," asks Frau Sultana. "So we can arrest him more easily. Then we'll pick up the others at their homes." *"Five Feet Two,"* simpers Frau Sultana. "That's my favorite song." "Looks like a good haul. Thanks for the information, son." "Well, it's not mine," declares Violette Morris. "I want to hear *Swing Troubadour!"* One of the Chapochnikoff brothers winds the victrola. The record is scratched. The singer sounds as if his voice is about to crack. Violette Morris beats time, murmuring the words:

Mais ton amie est en voyage
Pauvre Swing Troubadour . . .

The Lieutenant. Was it a fantasy fostered by my exhaustion? On certain days I could remember him talking to me like an old and close friend. His arrogance had dissolved, his face was sunken. Before my eyes there was just a very old lady looking at me tenderly.

En cueillant des roses printanières
Tristement elle fit un bouquet . . .

Weariness and confusion took hold of him as if, suddenly, he realized that he couldn't help me. He kept repeating: "Your little shopgirl's heart . . ." He meant,

I suppose, that I wasn't a "bad egg" (one of his expressions). At those times, I would have liked to thank him for his many kindnesses, he who was so abrupt and usually so overbearing, but I couldn't get the words out. After a moment I managed to stammer: "My heart is back at Batignolles," hoping the phrase would indicate my real self: a rough sort of fellow, emotional—no, restless—underneath and pretty decent on the whole.

Pauvre Swing Troubadour
Pauvre Swing Troubadour . . .

The record has stopped. "Dry vermouth, young man?" Lionel de Zieff inquires. The others gather round me. "Feeling queasy again?" the Marquis Baruzzi asks. "You look awfully pale." "Suppose we give him a breath of fresh air?" suggests Rosenheim. I hadn't noticed the large photo of Pola Negri behind the bar. Her lips are still, her face relaxed and serene. She gazes indifferently on this scene. The yellowed print heightens her faraway look. Pola Negri can't help me a bit.

The Lieutenant. He walked into Zelly's bar with Saint-Georges around midnight, as arranged. Everything happened so quickly. I motion to them with one hand. I don't dare meet their eyes. I draw them outside the bar. The Khedive, Gouari, and Vital-Léca instantly encircle them, revolvers drawn. At that moment I look them square in the eye. They stare at me dazedly at first, then

with a kind of triumphant scorn. Just as Vital-Léca is about to slip on the handcuffs, they break away, running for the boulevard. The Khedive fires three shots. They crumple at the corner of Avenue Victoria and the square.

Arrested during the next hour are:

Corvisart	—2 Avenue Bosquet
Pernety	—172 Rue de Vaugirard
Jasmin	—83 Boulevard Pasteur
Obligado	—5 Rue Duroc
Picpus	—17 Avenue Félix-Faure
Marbeuf and Pelleport	—28 Avenue de Breteuil

At each door I rang the bell and, as reassurance, gave my name.

They're asleep. Coco Lacour has the largest room in the house. I put Esmeralda in a blue room which was probably used by the owners' daughter. The owners left Paris in June "owing to circumstances." They'll return when things are back to normal—next year maybe, who knows? —and they'll throw us out of their house. I'll admit in court that I entered their home illegally. The Khedive, Philibert, and the others will appear with me. The world will wear its familiar colors once more. Paris will again be known as the City of Light, and the courtroom specta-

tors will pick their noses as they listen to the list of our crimes: denouncements, beatings, larceny, murder, illegal traffic of every description—things which, as I write these lines, are daily occurrences. Who will be willing to speak up for me? The Montrouge fortress on a December morning. The execution squad. And all the monstrosities that Madeleine Jacob will write about me. (Don't read them, Mama.) In any case, my accomplices will kill me even before Morality, Justice, and Humanity return to earth and confront me. I would like to leave a few memories behind: hand down to posterity, if nothing else, the names of Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. Tonight I'm watching over them, but how much longer? What will happen to them without me? They were my only companions. Gentle and silent as gazelles. Defenseless. I remember clipping out of a magazine the picture of a cat that had just been saved from drowning. Its fur drenched and dripping with mud. A noose around its neck with a stone at one end. I've never seen an expression that radiated such goodness. Coco Lacour and Esmeralda are like that cat. Don't misunderstand me: I don't belong to the Animal Protection Society or the League for the Rights of Man. What kind of work do I do? I wander about a deserted city. In the evening, after nine o'clock, it's buried in the blackout, and the Khedive, Philibert, all the rest of them form a circle around me. The days are white and fevered. I must find an oasis or I shall die: my love for Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. I suppose Hitler him-

self was feeling the need to unwind when he petted his dog. I PROTECT THEM. Whoever intends to harm them will have to reckon with me. I finger the silencer the Khedive gave me. My pockets are bulging with cash. I've got one of the most enviable names in France (I stole it, but that doesn't matter in times like these). I weigh 215 pounds on an empty stomach. Velvety eyes. A "promising" youngster. Promising what, though? All the good fairies hung over my cradle. They'd been drinking, undoubtedly. You're tackling a tough customer. So KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF THEM! I met them for the first time at the Grenelle métro, and I realized that a word, a gesture was enough to break them. I wonder what miracle brought them there, still alive. I thought of that cat saved from drowning. The blind red-headed giant's name was Coco Lacour, the little girl—or the little old lady—Esmeralda. In the presence of those two creatures, I felt pity. A wave of bitterness and violence caught me in its swell. It broke and left me reeling: push them onto the tracks. I had to dig my nails into my palms and stiffen my whole body. The tide swept over me again, its surf so gentle that I surrendered to it with closed eyes.

Every night I open the door of their rooms a crack, as softly as I can, and watch them sleeping. I have the same dizzy spell as that first time: draw the silencer from my pocket and kill them. I'll break adrift and reach that North Pole where tears no longer exist even as a comfort for solitude. They freeze on the rim of the lashes. Un-

watered sorrow. Two eyes staring at barren ground. If I'm still hesitant about getting rid of this blind man and this little girl—or this little old lady—will I at least betray the Lieutenant? What counts against him is his courage, his self-assurance, and the bald flourish that accompanies his every gesture. His steady blue eyes exasperate me. He belongs to that nuisance breed of heroes. Still, I can't help seeing him as a very old and indulgent lady. I don't take men seriously. Someday I'll find myself looking at them—and at me—the same way I look at Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. The toughest, the proudest ones will seem like frail creatures that need to be protected—or killed as a favor to themselves.

They played their game of mah-jongg in the living room before going to bed. The lamp cast a soft glow on the bookshelves and the life-sized portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro. They moved the pieces ever so slowly. Esmeralda had her head bowed and Coco Lacour was gnawing on his forefinger. Silence, everywhere around us. I closed the shutters. Coco Lacour drops off to sleep very quickly. Esmeralda is afraid of the dark, so I always leave her door ajar and a light in the hallway. I read to her for about half an hour, usually from a book I found in the nightstand of her room when I took over this house: *How to Raise Our Daughters,* by Madame Léon Daudet. "In the linen closet, more than anywhere else, the young girl will begin to sense the gravity of household responsibilities. For, indeed, is not the linen closet

the most imposing symbol of family security and stability? Behind its massive doors lie the orderly piles of cool sheets, the damask tablecloths, the neatly folded napkins; for me, there is nothing quite so gratifying to the eye as a well-appointed linen closet . . ." Esmeralda has fallen asleep. I pick out a few notes on the piano in the living room. I lean up against the window. A tranquil square such as you find in the 16th *arrondissement.* The leafy branches of the trees nudge the windowpane. I'd like to believe the house is mine. I've grown attached to the bookshelves, the lamps with their rosy shades, and the piano. I'd like to cultivate the virtues of domesticity, as Madame Léon Daudet advises, but I won't have time. The owners will return, sooner or later. What saddens me most is that they'll turn out Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. I don't feel sorry for myself. The only feelings I have are Panic (because of which I'll commit an endless chain of cowardly acts) and Pity for my fellow men; though their contorted faces frighten me, I find them very moving all the same. Will I spend the winter among these maniacs? I look awful. My never-ending circuits from the Lieutenant to the Khedive, the Khedive to the Lieutenant, are wearing me out. I want to placate them both at once (so they'll spare my life), and this double game demands a kind of physical stamina I don't have. Suddenly I want to cry. My indifference gives way to a state of mind the English Jews call a nervous break-

down. I stumble through a maze of thoughts and reach the conclusion that all these people, divided into two opposing camps, have leagued together secretly to destroy me. The Khedive and the Lieutenant are but a single person, and I myself only a terrified moth fluttering in panic from one lamp to the next, scorching its wings a little more each time.

Esmeralda is crying. I'll go comfort her. Her nightmares are brief, and she'll go back to sleep right away. I'll play mah-jongg while I wait for the Khedive, Philibert, and the others. I'll take a last look at the situation. On one side, the heroes "crouching in the shadows": the Lieutenant and his plucky little band of Saint-Cyr brains. On the other, the Khedive and his gangsters. I'm in the middle, tossed back and forth between the two, with my ambitions, very modest ones to be sure: BARTENDER at some country inn outside Paris. A heavy gate, a graveled driveway. A park all around and an encircling wall. Under clear skies, you could see from the third-floor windows the Eiffel Tower's searchlight sweeping the horizon.

Bartender. You get used to it. Sometimes it's painful. Especially after about twenty years when a more brilliant future appears to beckon. Not for me. What do you do? Make cocktails. On Saturday nights the orders start to pour in. Gin Alexander. Pink Lady. Irish coffee. A twist of lemon peel. Two rum punches. The customers, in swelling numbers, besiege the bar where I stand mixing the

rainbow-tinted liquids. Don't keep them waiting. I'm afraid they'll lunge at me if there's a moment's delay. By filling their glasses in a hurry I try to keep them away. I'm not especially fond of human contact. Porto Flip? Whatever they want. I'm serving up drinks. As good a way as any to protect yourself from your fellow creatures and, let's face it, to get rid of them. Curaçao? Marie Brizard? Their faces are turning blue. They're lurching, and it won't be long before they collapse stone drunk. Leaning on the bar, I'll watch them fall asleep. They won't be able to harm me any more. Silence, at last. My breath still coming short.

Behind me, photos of Henri Garat, Fred Bretonnel, and a few other pre-war celebrities whose smiles have faded over the years. At arm's length, an issue of *L'Illustration* on the liner *Normandie*. The grill, the chairs along the afterdeck. The nursery. The smoking lounge. The ballroom. The sailors' charity ball on May 25 under Madame Flandin's patronage. Swallowed up, all of it. I know what it's like. I was on the *Titanic* when it sank. Midnight. I'm listening to some old songs of Charles Trenet:

. . . Bonsoir
Jolie madame . . .

The record is scratched, but I never tire of hearing it. Sometimes I play another one:

Tout est fini, plus de prom'nades
Plus de printemps, Swing Troubadour . . .

The inn, like a bathyscaphe, is washed ashore in a sunken city. Atlantis? Drowned men glide along the Boulevard Haussmann.

. . . Ton destin
Swing Troubadour . . .

They linger round the tables at Fouquet. Most of them have lost all semblance of humanity. Their vitals are barely visible under gaudy tatters. In the waiting room at Saint-Lazare station, bodies drift about in clusters and I see some disappearing through the windows of suburban trains. On the Rue d'Amsterdam, they're coming out of the Monseigneur nightclub, sickly green but much better preserved than the ones before. I continue my route. Élysée-Montmartre. Magic City. Luna Park. Rialto-Dancing. Ten thousand, a hundred thousand drowned men with labored, listless movements, like the cast of a slow-motion film. Silence. Now and then they brush against the bathyscaphe and their faces come to rest against the porthole, glassy-eyed, open-mouthed.

. . . Swing Troubadour . . .

I shan't be able to surface again. The air grows thin, the bar lights waver, and I find myself back at Austerlitz

station in the summertime. Everybody's leaving for the Southern Zone. They jam the ticket windows and board the trains bound for Hendaye. They'll cross the Spanish border. Never to return. Some still stroll along the platforms but will fade away any second. Hold them back? I'm walking west in Paris. Châtelet. Palais-Royal. Place de la Concorde. The sky is too blue, the foliage much too tender. The gardens of the Champs-Élysées are like a verdant spa.

Avenue Kléber. I turn left. Cimarosa Square. *A tranquil square such as you find in the 16th arrondissement.* The music shed is no longer in use, and the statue of Toussaint L'Ouverture has a coat of gray mold. The house at No. 3 *bis* once belonged to M. and Mme de Bel-Respiro. On May 13, 1897, they gave a Persian costume ball there, and M. de Bel-Respiro's son received the guests dressed as a rajah. He died the next day in the fire at the Charity Bazaar. Mme de Bel-Respiro loved music, and especially Isidore Lara's "Farewell Rondel." M. de Bel-Respiro painted in his spare time. I really must mention all these details since everyone has forgotten them.

August in Paris calls forth a host of memories. The sun, the deserted avenues, the murmur of chestnut trees . . . I sit on a bench and gaze at the brick and stone façade. The shutters have been closed for a long time. Coco Lacour's and Esmeralda's rooms were on the third floor. I had the attic room at the left. In the living room, a life-size self-portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro in his Spahi

officer's uniform. For a while I stared at his face and the decorations studding his chest. Legion of Honor. Cross of the Holy Sepulcher. Danilo de Monténégro. Cross of St. George of Russia. Tower and Sword of Portugal. I had used this man's absence to appropriate his house. The nightmare will end, M. de Bel-Respiro will be back and turn us out, I told myself, while they were torturing that poor devil and he was staining the Savonnerie carpet with his blood. A number of very odd things went on at No. 3 *bis* while I lived there. Some nights I was awakened by cries of pain, footsteps hurrying to and fro on the main floor. The Khedive's voice. Philibert's. I looked out the window. Two or three shadowy forms were being shoved into cars parked in front of the house. The doors slammed. The drone of a motor growing fainter and fainter. Silence. Impossible to get back to sleep. I was thinking of M. de Bel-Respiro's son and his ghastly death. He certainly wasn't equipped to face that. And Princess de Lamballe would have been equally astounded to learn a few years beforehand of her own assassination. And I? Who would have guessed that I'd turn henchman for a gang of extortionists? Yet all I had to do was light the lamp and go down to the living room, and the familiar pattern of things was at once restored. The self-portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro was still there. Mme de Bel-Respiro's Arabian perfume clung to the walls and made your head reel. The mistress of the house was smiling. I was her son, Lieutenant Commander Maxime de Bel-

Respiro, on leave, and I was attending one of the parties that drew personalities from the arts and political circles to No. 3 *bis:* Ida Rubinstein, Gaston Calmette, Federico de Madrazzo, Louis Barthou, Gauthier-Villars, Armande Cassive, Bouffe de Saint-Blaise, Frank Le Harivel, José de Strada, Mery Laurent, Mlle Mylo d'Arcille. My mother was playing the "Farewell Rondel" on the piano. Suddenly I noted several small bloodstains on the Savonnerie carpet. One of the Louis XV armchairs had been overturned: the fellow who was screaming just a while ago must have put up a struggle while they were working him over. Under the console table, a shoe, a tie, a pen. In view of the situation there's no point in continuing an account of the delightful gathering at No. 3 *bis.* Mme de Bel-Respiro had left the room. I tried to keep the guests from leaving. José de Strada, who was giving a reading from his *Abeilles d'or,* stopped short, petrified. Mlle Mylo d'Arcille had fainted. They were going to kill Barthou. Calmette too. Bouffe de Saint-Blaise and Gauthier-Villars had disappeared. Frank Le Harivel and Madrazzo were no more than frantic moths. Ida Rubinstein, Armande Cassive, and Mery Laurent became transparent. I found myself alone in front of the self-portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro. I was twenty years old.

Outside, the blackout. What if the Khedive and Philibert returned with their cars? I was definitely unfit to weather such sinister times. To ease my mind, I went through every closet in the house until sunrise. M. de

Bel-Respiro had left behind a red notebook that was his diary. I read it over many times during those sleepless nights. "Frank le Harivel lived at 8 rue Lincoln. This exemplary gentleman is now forgotten, yet his profile was once a familiar sight to strollers along the Allée des Acacias. . . ." "Mlle Mylo d'Arcille, an utterly charming young woman remembered perhaps by the staunch patrons of yesterday's music halls . . ." "Was José de Strada, 'the hermit of La Muette,' an unsung genius? No one cares about the question nowadays." "Armande Cassive died here, alone and impoverished. . . ." This man certainly sensed the transience of things. "Does anyone still remember Alec Carter, the legendary jockey? or Rital del Erido?" Life is unjust.

In the drawers, two or three yellowed snapshots, old letters. A withered bouquet on Mme de Bel-Respiro's desk. In a trunk she left behind, several dresses from Worth. One night I slipped on the most beautiful among them: a peau-de-soie with imitation tulle and festoons of pink morning-glories. I've no penchant whatever for transvestism, but at that moment my situation seemed so hopeless and my solitude so vast that I determined to cheer myself up by putting on some nonsensical act. Standing in front of the Venetian mirror in the living room (wearing a Lambelle hat replete with flowers, plumes, and lace), I really felt like laughing. Murderers were reaping a harvest in the blackout. Pretend you're playing their game, the Lieutenant had told me, but he

knew perfectly well that one day I'd join their ranks. Then why did he desert me? You don't leave a child all alone in the dark. It frightens him at first; he gets used to it and winds up shunning the sunlight altogether. Paris would never again be known as the City of Light, I was wearing a dress and hat that would have made Emilienne d'Alençon green with envy, and thinking about the aimlessness and superficiality of my existence. Wasn't it true that Goodness, Justice, Contentment, Freedom, and Progress called for far more effort and vision than were mine to give? Musing thus, I began to make up my face. I used Mme de Bel-Respiro's cosmetics: kohl, and an Oriental type of henna which, so they say, gives the courtesans their fresh and velvety skin. Professional zeal carried me to the point of dotting my face with beauty marks, heart-, moon-, or comet-shaped. Then, to while away the time, I waited till dawn for the apocalypse.

Five in the afternoon. Sunlight, vast curtains of silence descending on the square. I thought I saw a shadow at the only window where the shutters were not drawn. Who's still living at No. 3 *bis*? I ring the bell. Someone's coming down the stairs. The door opens a crack. An old woman. She asks me what I want. To walk through the house. She snaps back that this is out of the question, since the owners are away. Then shuts the door. Now she's watching me, her face hard against the windowpane.

Avenue Henri-Martin. The first paths entering the Bois de Boulogne. Let's go as far as the Lower Lake. I often

went over to that island with Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. Ever since then I pursued my ideal: examining from afar —the farthest possible—people, their ceaseless activity, their pitiless scheming. The island seemed a suitable place, with its lawns and its Chinese pavilion. A little farther on. The Pré Catelan. We came there the night I denounced the whole ring. The orchestra was playing a Creole waltz. The elderly gentleman and the elderly lady at the table next to ours . . . Esmeralda was sipping a grenadine, Coco Lacour was smoking his cigar . . . Soon the Khedive and Philibert would be badgering me with questions. A chain of figures dancing round me, faster and faster, clamoring louder and louder, and I'll finally give in so they'll let me alone. Meanwhile, I didn't waste those precious moments of respite. He was smiling. She was blowing bubbles through her straw . . . I see them as dark silhouettes against the light. Time has passed. If I didn't record their names, Coco Lacour, Esmeralda, there'd be no trace of their presence on earth.

A little beyond, to the west, La Grande Cascade restaurant. We never went that far: there were guards on the Pont de Suresnes. It must be a bad dream. Everything is so still now all along the path bordering the water. Someone on a barge waved to me . . . I remember feeling sad when we came exploring this far. Impossible to cross the Seine. We had to come back into the Bois. I realized that a hunting party was on our track and they'd finally drive us into the open. The trains weren't running.

Too bad. I would have liked to get them off my back once and for all. Reach Lausanne, in a neutral country. Coco Lacour, Esmeralda, and I are strolling along the Lake of Geneva shore. There in Lausanne, all our fears are gone. It's the end of a lovely summer afternoon, like today. Boulevard de la Seine. Avenue de Neuilly. Porte Maillot. After leaving the Bois we sometimes stopped at Luna Park. Coco Lacour liked the ball-throwing stands and the gallery of distorting mirrors. We got into the "Sirocco" caterpillar that whirled faster and faster. Laughter, music. A platform with an inscription in luminous letters: "ASSASSINATION OF THE PRINCESS DE LAMBALLE." You could see a reclining woman. Above the bed, a red target at which the would-be marksmen were aiming their revolvers. Each time they hit the bull's-eye, the bed teetered and out fell the shrieking woman. Other bloody attractions. We weren't old enough for those things and became frightened, like three children abandoned at the height of some lunatic affair. What's left of all this frenzy, tumult, and violence? A wasteland adjoining the Boulevard Gouvion–Saint-Cyr. I know the district. I used to live there. Place des Acacias. A sixth-floor room. In those days everything was rosy: I was eighteen, and I was drawing a naval pension with forged papers. Apparently no one wished me ill. A handful of human contacts: my mother, a few dogs, two or three old men, and Lili Marlene. Many an afternoon spent reading or walking the streets. The boys my age, so full of life, astounded me.

They held nothing back. Their eyes sparkled. My idea was that the less one was seen, the better. Painfully shy. Neutral-colored suits. That's what I thought. Place Pereire. On warm evenings I'd sit outside at the Royal-Villiers café. Someone at the next table smiled at me. Cigarette? He held out a package of Khedives and we started to talk. He and a friend of his ran a private detective agency. They offered me a job at their place. They liked my honest looks and good manners. My job was shadowing. After that, they put me to work in earnest: investigations, information-gathering of all sorts, confidential missions. I had an office all to myself at the agency's headquarters, 177 Avenue Niel. My bosses didn't have an ounce of respectability: Henri Normand, known as "the Khedive" (because of his brand of cigarettes), was a former convict; Pierre Philibert, a top police inspector who'd been cashiered. I realized that they were giving me "slightly off-color" jobs. Yet it never occurred to me to quit the place. In my office on the Avenue Niel I took stock of my responsibilities: first and foremost, to look after Mama since she had little to live on. I was sorry I had neglected my role as family provider up to that point, but now that I was working and bringing in a steady salary, I'd be a model son.

Avenue de Wagram. Place des Ternes. The Brasserie Lorraine on my left, where I'd made an appointment with him. He was being blackmailed and counted on our agency to get him off the hook. Myopic eyes. His hands

trembled. Stammering, he asked me whether I had "the papers." Yes, I replied, very softly, but he'd have to give me twenty thousand francs. Cash. After that we'd see. We met again the next day at the same place. He handed me an envelope. Everything was there. Instead of turning over "the papers," I got up and took off. You don't like to use those tactics, but they become a habit. My bosses gave me a 10 per cent commission on this type of business. In the evening I'd bring Mama tumbrels of orchids. My affluence worried her. Perhaps she guessed that I was wasting my youth for a handful of cash. She never questioned me about it.

Le temps passe très vite, et les années vous quittent.
Un jour, on est un grand garçon . . .

I would rather have devoted myself to a worthier cause than that so-called private detective agency. I'd have liked to be a doctor, but open wounds and the sight of blood make me ill. On the other hand, moral ugliness doesn't bother me. Innately suspicious, I'm apt to single out the worst side of people and things so I won't be caught off guard. I was perfectly at home then at the Avenue Niel, where there was talk of nothing but extortion, breach of confidence, larceny, swindles, corruption of all sorts, and where the customers we dealt with were real sewer rats. (On this last score, my employers came no better recommended.) The only positive factor: I was earning fantastic

sums of money, as I've already said. It's important to me. It was in the pawnshop on the Rue Pierre Charron (my mother and I often went there; they refused to take our imitation jewelry) that I decided once and for all that poverty was a pain in the neck. You'll think I have no principles. I started out with infinite innocence of heart and mind. It gets lost along the way. Place de l'Étoile. Nine in the evening. The lights along the Champs-Élysées sparkle as they always have. They haven't kept their promise. This avenue, so seemingly majestic from afar, is one of the vilest sections of Paris. The Claridge, Fouquet, Hungaria, the Lido, the Embassy, Butterfly . . . at each stop I met new faces: Costachesco, the Baron de Lussatz, Odicharvi, Hayakawa, Lionel de Zieff, Pols de Helder. . . . Adventurers, abortionists, sharpers, bogus journalists, sham lawyers and accountants who gravitated toward the Khedive and Mr. Philibert. Supplemented by a whole battery of demimondaines, strip-teasers, drug addicts. . . . Frau Sultana, Simone Bouquereau, Baroness Lydia Stahl, Violette Morris, Magda d'Andurian. . . . My two bosses launched me into this underworld. *Champs Élysées:* the Elysian Fields. That's what they called the joyous abode of the righteous and heroic dead. So I wonder how the avenue where I'm standing came by that name. I do see ghosts there, but only those of Mr. Philibert, the Khedive, and their acolytes. Walking arm in arm out of the Claridge come Joanovici and the Count de Cagliostro. They wear white suits and platinum rings. The

shy young man crossing the Rue Lord Byron is Eugene Weidmann. Motionless in front of Pam-Pam stands Thérèse de Païva, the Second Empire's most beautiful whore. On the corner of the Rue Marbeuf, Dr. Petiot smiled at me. The Colisée's outdoor café: a group of black marketeers are gulping down champagne. Including Count Baruzzi, the Chapochnikoff brothers, Rachid von Rosenheim, Jean-Farouk de Méthode, Otto da Silva, a host of others . . . If I can reach the Rond-Point, maybe I can lose these phantoms. Hurry. The silence and greenery in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées. I often used to stop there. After working all afternoon in bars along the avenue ("business" appointments with the above-mentioned persons), I'd walk over to this park for a breath of clean air. I'd sit on a bench, short of breath. Pockets full of cash. Twenty thousand, sometimes a hundred thousand francs.

Our agency was, if not approved of, at least tolerated by the Police Department: we furnished whatever information they asked for. Moreover, we were running a racket with the above-mentioned persons. They believed they were buying our silence and protection, since Mr. Philibert had close ties with his former colleagues, Inspectors Rothé, David, Jalby, Jurgens, Santoni, Permilleux, Sadowsky, François, and Detmar. My job, as a matter of fact, was to collect the racket money. Twenty thousand, sometimes a hundred thousand francs. It had been a rough day. Bargaining and more bargaining. I could see their faces: sallow, oily, standard brands in a police

line-up. Some of them tried to hold out and I was obliged to—yes, in spite of all my timidity and softheartedness —raise my voice, threaten to go straight to the police at the Quai des Orfèvres if they didn't pay up. I told them about the files my bosses had me keep with a record of each and every name and life history. Nothing very special, those files. They would dig out their wallets, and call me a "squealer." The word stung.

I was alone on the bench. Some places invite reflection. Public gardens, for instance, lost kingdoms in Paris, fading oases amid the roar and the callousness of humanity. The Tuileries. The Luxembourg. The Bois de Boulogne. But never did I do so much thinking as in the Champs-Élysées gardens. What really was my profession? Blackmailer? Police spy? I counted the cash and took out my 10 per cent. I'd go over to Lachaume and order a whole thicket of red roses. Pick out two or three rings at Van Cleef & Arpels. Then buy fifty-odd dresses at Piguet, Lelong, and Molyneux. All that for Mama—blackmailer, bum, informer, finger man, perhaps killer, but a model son. That was my only consolation. It was getting dark. The children were leaving the park after one last ride on the carousel. Along the Champs-Élysées the street lights went on all at once. It would have paid—I told myself—to stick close to the Place des Acacias. Make sure to avoid the main streets and boulevards because of the noise, the unpleasant encounters. What a foolhardy idea to be sitting outside at the Royal-Villiers café, Place

Pereire, I who was so discreet and wary, so anxious to avoid being seen. But you have to start out somewhere in life. You can't buy it off. In the end it sends round to you its recruiting sergeants: the Khedive and Mr. Philibert, as it happened. On some other evening I could have fallen among more honorable companions who might have encouraged me to enter the textile field or become a writer. Having no particular bent for any profession, I waited for my elders to decide what I would do. Up to them to figure out what they'd like me to be. I left it in their lap.

Boy scout? Florist? Tennis pro? No:

Employee of a phony detective agency.

Blackmailer, finger man, extortionist.

Still, it was rather surprising. I didn't have the equipment for this kind of work: an ugly temperament, lack of scruples, a relish for sordid company. I dug into it conscientiously, the way others go for a boilermaker's license. Funny thing about guys like me: they can just as easily end up in the Pantheon as in Thiais cemetery, dumping-ground for spies. They become heroes. Or rats. Nobody will ever know that they got dragged into some foul mess to save their own skins. What they really cared about: their stamp collection, and a bit of peace and quiet, on the Place des Acacias, so they could breathe.

Meanwhile, I was turning out a miserable piece of goods. My apathy and indifference made me doubly vulnerable to the Khedive's and Mr. Philibert's influence. I

remembered the words of a doctor, a neighbor on my floor at the Place des Acacias. "After you reach twenty," he told me, "you start to rot. Fewer and fewer nerve cells, my boy." I jotted this remark down on an engagement calendar, for we should always heed the experience of our elders. He was right, I now realized. My illegal activities and unsavory associations would rob me of the bloom of youth. My future? A race, with the finish line in no man's land. Being dragged to a scaffold without a chance to catch my breath. Someone whispered in my ear: All you'll have had from life is this whirlwind you let yourself be caught up in—gypsy music, wilder and wilder, to muffle my screams. This evening the air is decidedly balmy. As in the past, always at the same time, the donkeys are leaving the main path and heading home to the stables. All day long they've had to walk the children to and fro. They disappear around the corner of the Avenue Gabriel. No one will ever hear about their suffering. Such reticence was impressive. As they went by, my peace of mind returned, my indifference. I tried to gather my thoughts together. They were few and far between, and all extremely commonplace. I'm not the thinking sort. Too emotional for that. Lazy. A couple of quick efforts always brought me to the same conclusion: I'll die sooner or later. Fewer and fewer nerve cells. A lengthy process of putrefaction. The doctor had warned me. I should add that my work inclined me toward perverse pleasures: police informer and blackmailer at the age of

twenty, that narrows one's sights a bit. A funny odor permeated 177 Avenue Niel from the antiquated furniture and the wallpaper. The light was never steady. Behind the desk with the wooden files where I kept the records on our "customers." I indexed them by names of poisonous plants: Inky Coprinus, Belladonna, Satanic Boletus, Henbane, Livid Entoloma. . . . The slightest contact with them made me start to decalcify. My clothes reeked of Avenue Niel's stifling odor. I let myself be contaminated. This disease? An accelerated aging process, a physical and moral decay just as the doctor had said. Yet I have no relish for morbid situations.

Un petit village
Un vieux clocher

was the pinnacle of my fondest hopes. Unfortunately, I was in a city, a kind of sprawling Luna Park where the Khedive and Mr. Philibert were driving me from shooting galleries to roller coasters, from Punch and Judy to "Sirocco" caterpillars. Finally I lay down on a bench. I wasn't meant for this sort of thing. I never asked a soul for anything. It was they who came after me.

A little farther along. On the left, the Ambassadeurs theater. They're performing an operetta that nobody would remember. There can't be much of an audience. An elderly lady, an elderly gentleman, two or three English tourists. I pass along a grassy stretch, the last of the

hedges. Place de la Concorde. The street lights were blinding. I stood still, breathing hard. Overhead, the Marly horses were rearing, straining every nerve to resist the will of man. Ready to bolt across the square. A magnificent, sweeping view, the only place in Paris that leaves you with the giddiness of mountain peaks. A landscape of stone and sparkling lights. Over by the Tuileries, the Ocean. I was on the quarter-deck of a liner bound for the Northwest, carrying with it the Madeleine, the Opéra, the Berlitz Palace, the Church of La Trinité. It was about to sink. Tomorrow we'd be resting on the ocean floor, three thousand fathoms deep. My shipmates no longer filled me with dread. The gaping mouth of the Baron de Lussatz; Odicharvi's cruel eyes; the treacherous Chapochnikoff brothers; Frau Sultana twisting a strap around her left arm to make the vein bulge and injecting herself with 30 cc. of morphine; Zieff with his vulgarity, his gold chronometer, his pudgy fingers encased in rings; Ivanoff and his sessions of sexuo-divine paneurhythmics; Costachesco, Jean-Farouk de Méthode, and Rachid von Rosenheim discussing their abortive frauds; and the Khedive's gangster crew of hirelings: Armand le Fou, Jo Reocreux, Tony Breton, Vital-Léca, Robert le Pâle, Gouari, Danos, Codébo. . . . Before long all those sinister creatures would be meat for octopi, sharks, and moray eels. I'd share their fate. Readily. I had realized this quite suddenly one night when, with arms spread to form a cross, I was going along the Place de la Concorde. My

shadow projected all the way to the Rue Royale, my left hand extended to the Champs-Élysées gardens, my right hand to the Rue Saint-Florentin. The idea of Jesus Christ might have occurred to me, but I thought of Judas Iscariot. No one had understood him. It took a good deal of humility and courage to shoulder the crushing burden of mankind's disgrace. To die of it. Alone. Like a great man. Judas, my big brother. Born skeptics, both of us. Not an ounce of trust did we place in our fellow men, in ourselves or in any likely savior. Shall I find the strength to follow you to the very end? A difficult path. Night was coming on, but my job as informer and blackmailer made me used to the darkness. I put aside my unpleasant thoughts about my shipmates and their crimes. With a few weeks of hard work behind me at the Avenue Niel, nothing surprised me any more. Even if they came up with a new set of facial expressions, it wouldn't make any difference. I watched them moving about on the promenade deck, along the gangways, noting their coarse frivolity. A waste of time when you consider that water was already pouring into the hold. The main lounge and the ballroom would be next. With the ship about to capsize, my pity went out to the most savage passengers. Hitler himself could have come rushing into my arms crying like a child. The Arcades along the Rue de Rivoli. Something ominous was afoot. I had noticed the endless stream of cars along the outer boulevards. They were fleeing Paris. Probably the war. A sudden disaster. Coming out

of Hilditch & Key, where I'd just picked out a tie, I examined this strip of fabric men loop around their necks. A blue-and-white striped tie. That afternoon I was also wearing a tan suit and crepe-soled shoes. In my wallet, a photograph of Mama and an expired metro ticket. I'd just had a haircut. These details were of no interest to anyone. People were bent only on saving their own skins. *Chacun pour soi.* Before long there wasn't a soul or a car on the streets. Even Mama had left. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. This silence, this deserted city, symbolized my state of mind. I examined my tie and shoes again. The sun was nice and warm. The words of a song came back to me:

Seul
Depuis toujours . . .

What was happening to the world? I didn't even read the headlines. Anyway, there wouldn't be any more newspapers. Or trains. In fact, Mama had taken the last Paris-Lausanne Express.

Seul il a souffert chaque jour
Il pleure avec le ciel de Paris. . . .

A sad, sweet song, the kind I liked. Unfortunately, it was no time for romance. We were living—it seemed to me—in a tragic era. You don't go around humming nostalgic

pre-war tunes when there's wholesale agony everywhere you turn. I had no sense of decorum. Am I to blame? I never had much taste for anything. Except the circus, comic operas, and musicals.

By the time I reached the Rue de Castiglione, night had fallen. Someone was following me. A slap on the shoulder. The Khedive. I was expecting that we would meet. At that moment, on that very spot. A nightmare: this menace was no stranger to me. He takes my arm. We get into a car. We cross the Place Vendôme. The street lights cast an eerie blue glow. A single window alight in the Hotel Continental. Blackout. You'll have to get used to it, my boy. He laughs and turns on the radio.

Un doux parfum qu'on respire
c'est
Fleur bleue . . .

A dark mass looms in front of us. The Opéra? The Church of La Trinité? On the left, Floresco's brightly lit sign. We're on the Rue Pigalle. He speeds up.

Un regard qui vous attire
c'est
Fleur bleue. . . .

He whistles the refrain softly, pumping his head in tempo. We race along at a dizzying speed. He starts to

turn. My shoulder butts against his. The brakes screech. The hall lights on the landings don't work. I grope my way up the stairs clutching the banister. He strikes a match, just giving me time to glance at the marble plaque on the door: "Normand-Philibert Agency." We walk in. The smell turns my stomach—more nauseating than ever. Mr. Philibert is standing in the entrance. He was waiting for us. A cigarette dangles from the corner of his mouth. He winks at me and I, despite my weariness, manage a smile: I was thinking that Mama had already reached Lausanne. There, she'd have nothing to fear. Mr. Philibert takes us into his office. He complains about the irregular electricity. This shaky light from the bronze ceiling fixture doesn't surprise me. It had always been like that at 177 Avenue Niel. The Khedive offers us champagne and produces a bottle from his left jacket pocket. As of today, our "agency"—so it seems—is due for a sizable expansion. Recent events have worked out to our advantage. We're moving into a private house at 3 *bis* Cimarosa Square. No more of this small-time stuff. We're in line for some important work. It's even possible that the Khedive will become police commissioner. Now's the chance to move ahead, in these troubled times. Our job: to carry out various investigations, searches, interrogations, and arrests. The "Cimarosa Square Bureau" will operate on two levels: as an arm of the police and as a "purchase office" carrying goods and raw materials that will shortly be unobtainable. The Khedive has al-

ready picked out some fifty people to work with us. Old acquaintances of his. All of them, along with their identification photos, are on file at 177 Avenue Niel. Having said this, Mr. Philibert hands us a glass of champagne. We drink to our success. We will be—so it seems—the rulers of Paris. The Khedive pats my cheek and slips a roll of bills into my inside breast pocket. The two of them talk, look over some files and appointment books, make telephone calls. Now and then a burst of voices reaches me. Impossible to follow their conversation. I go into the adjoining room, our "clients'" waiting room. There they'd sit in the worn leather chairs. On the walls, a few colored prints of harvest scenes. A sideboard and pine furniture. Beyond the far door, a room and bathroom. I used to stay on alone in the evening to put the files in order. I worked in the waiting room. No one would have guessed that this apartment housed a detective agency. A retired couple used to live there. I drew the curtains. Silence. Wavering light. The scent of faded things. "Dreaming, my boy?" The Khedive laughs and straightens his hat in the mirror. We walk through the vestibule. Mr. Philibert snaps on a flashlight. We're having a housewarming tonight at 3 *bis* Cimarosa Square. The owners have left. We have taken over their house. A cause for celebration. Hurry. Our friends are waiting for us at L'Heure Mauve, a night club on the Champs-Élysées . . .

The following week the Khedive instructs me to get information for our "agency" on the activities of a certain

Lieutenant Dominique. We received a memorandum on him giving his address, his photo, and the comment: "To be kept under surveillance." I have to find some way of approaching this man. I go to his house at 5 rue Boisrobert, in the 15th District. A modest little building. The Lieutenant himself comes to the door. I ask for Mr. Henri Normand. He tells me there's some mistake. Then I stammer out my whole story: I'm an escaped prisoner of war. One of my buddies told me to get in touch with Mr. Normand, 5 rue Boisrobert, if I ever managed to escape. He would hide me. My buddy probably got the address wrong. I don't know a soul in Paris. I've run out of money. I don't know where to turn. He eyes me carefully. I squeeze out a couple of tears to convince him. The next thing I know I'm in his office. In a deep, vibrant voice he tells me that boys my age mustn't be demoralized by the disaster that has struck our country. He's still trying to size me up. And suddenly, this question: "Do you want to work with us?" He's in charge of a group of "terrific" guys. Most of them are escaped prisoners like myself. Boys from Saint-Cyr. Career army officers. A few civilians too. Tough as they come. The elite of the ranks. We're waging a hidden struggle against the powers of darkness that are presently in command. A difficult task, but when there's courage, nothing's impossible. Goodness, Freedom, and Morality will rule again before too long. He, Lieutenant Dominique, swears by it. I don't share his optimism. I think of the report I'll have to turn in to the

Khedive this evening at Cimarosa Square. The Lieutenant supplies me with some other facts: he calls his group the Ring of the Knights of the Shadows, R.K.S. No chance of fighting in the open, obviously. It's an underground war. We'll live like hunted men. Each member of the group has taken an alias, the name of a metro station. He'll introduce them to me shortly: Saint-Georges. Obligado. Corvisart. Pernety. Still others. As for me, I'll be known as "Princess de Lamballe." Why "Princess de Lamballe"? Just a whim of the Lieutenant's. "Are you prepared to join our network? Honor demands it. You shouldn't hesitate. Well?" I reply: "Yes," in a faint voice. "Don't ever waver, lad. I know, times are pretty sad. The gangsters are running the show. There's a whiff of rot in the air. It won't last. Have a little will power, Lamballe." He wants me to stay on at the Rue Boisrobert, but I quickly invent an old uncle in the suburbs who'll put me up. We make a date for tomorrow afternoon at the Place des Pyramides in front of Joan of Arc's statue. "Goodbye, Lamballe." He gives me a piercing look, his eyes narrow, and I can't bear the glint of them. He repeats: "Goodbye, LAM-BALLE," stressing each syllable in a funny way: LAM-BALLE. He shuts the door. It was getting dark. I wandered aimlessly through this unfamiliar section of town. They must be waiting for me at Cimarosa Square. What shall I tell them? To put it baldly, Lieutenant Dominique was a hero. And so was every member of his group . . . But I still had to make a detailed report to the Khedive and

Mr. Philibert. The existence of the R.K.S. surprised them. They weren't expecting that extensive an operation. "You're going to infiltrate them. Try to get the names and addresses. Looks like a fine haul." For the first time in my life, I had what you call a twinge of conscience. A momentary one, anyway. They advanced me a hundred thousand francs on the information I was to obtain.

Place des Pyramides. You'd like to forget the past, but your steps inevitably take you back to painful encounters. The Lieutenant was pacing up and down in front of the statue of Joan of Arc. He introduced me to a tall fellow with short-cropped blond hair and periwinkle eyes: Saint-Georges, a Saint-Cyr man. We entered the Tuileries gardens and sat down at the refreshment stand near the carousel. I was back in the familiar setting of my childhood. We ordered three bottles of fruit juice. The waiter brought them and told us these were the last of their pre-war supply. Soon there'd be no more fruit juice. "We'll manage without it," said Saint-Georges with a wry smile. He seemed very determined. "You're an escaped prisoner?" he questioned me. "Which regiment?" "Fifth Infantry," I replied in an empty voice, "but I'd rather not think about it." Making a great effort, I added: "I have only one wish: to continue the struggle to the end." My profession of faith seemed to convince him. He rewarded me with a handshake. "I've rounded up a few members of the network to introduce to you," the Lieutenant told me. They're waiting for us at the Rue Bois-

robert." Corvisart, Obligado, Pernety, and Jasmin are there. The Lieutenant speaks warmly of me: my distress over our defeat. My will to take up the struggle anew. The honor and the consolation of becoming their comrade in the R.K.S. "All right, Lamballe, we have a mission for you." He goes on to explain that a number of corrupt individuals were riding with the tide of events and indulging their worst instincts. Just what you'd expect in these times of uneasiness and confusion. These gangsters are assured of complete impunity: they've been given police cards and gun permits. Their loathsome purpose is to strike at the patriots and the honest folk; they commit all sorts of crimes. They took over a private house at 3 *bis* Cimarosa Square, 16th *arrondissement*. Their office is publicly listed as the "Paris–Berlin–Monte Carlo Intercommercial Company." These are all the facts I have. Our duty: to neutralize them as quickly as possible. "I'm counting on you, Lamballe. You're going to penetrate that group. Keep us informed about their activities. It's up to you, Lamballe." Pernety hands me a cognac. Jasmin, Obligado, Saint-Georges, and Corvisart smile at me. Later on, we're returning along the Boulevard Pasteur. The Lieutenant had wanted to go with me as far as the Sèvres-Lecourbe metro station. As we say goodbye, he looks me straight in the eye: "Ticklish mission, Lamballe. A kind of double-cross. Keep in touch with me. Good luck, Lamballe." What if I told him the truth? Too late. I thought of Mama. She, at least, was safe. I had bought the villa

in Lausanne for her with the commissions I was making at Avenue Niel. I could have gone to Switzerland with her, but I stayed here out of apathy or indifference. I've already said that I didn't trouble myself much over humanity's fate. Nor did my own future excite me particularly. Just float with the current. A straw in the wind. That evening I report to the Khedive my contact with Corvisart, Obligado, Jasmin, Pernety, and Saint-Georges. I don't know their addresses yet, but it shouldn't take long to get them. I promise to deliver the information on these men as fast as possible. And on others to whom the Lieutenant will surely introduce me. The way things are going, we'll pull off "a fine haul." He repeats this, rubbing his hands. "I was sure you'd win their confidence straight off with your little choirboy's face." Suddenly my head begins to reel. I tell him that the ringleader is not, as I had thought, the Lieutenant. "Who is it, then?" I'm on the edge of a precipice; a few steps are probably all it would take to save me. "WHO?" But I haven't the strength. "WHO?" "Someone called LAM-BALLE. LAM-BALLE." "We'll get hold of him, all right. Try to identify him." Things were getting complicated. Was I to blame? Each of them had set me up as a double agent. I didn't want to let anyone down. The Khedive and Philibert any more than the Lieutenant and his Saint-Cyr boys. You'll have to choose, I told myself. "Knight of the Shadows" or hired agent for a den of thieves on Cimarosa Square? Hero or stool pigeon? Neither. Some books gave me a

few ideas about my problem: *Anthology of Traitors from Alcibiades to Captain Dreyfus; The Real Joanovici; The Mysterious Knight of Eon; Fregoli, the Man from Nowhere.* I felt a bond with all those people. Yet I'm no jokester. I, too, have experienced what's known as a deep emotion. Profound. Compelling. The only one I have firsthand knowledge of, powerful enough to make me move mountains: FEAR. Paris was settling deeper into silence and the blackout. When I speak of those days I have the feeling I'm talking to deaf people or that my voice isn't loud enough. I WAS PET-RI-FIED. The metro slowed down as it approached the Pont de Passy. Sèvres-Lecourbe / Cambronne / La Motte-Picquet / Dupleix / Grenelle / Passy. Mornings I'd go the opposite way, from Passy to Sèvres-Lecourbe. From Cimarosa Square in the 16th District to rue Boisrobert, 15th District. From the Lieutenant to the Khedive. From the Khedive to the Lieutenant. The pendulum path of a double agent. Exhausting. Breath coming short. "Try to get the names and addresses. Looks like a fine haul. I'm counting on you, Lamballe. You'll get us information on those gangsters." I would have liked to take sides, but I had no more interest in the "Ring of the Knights of the Shadows" than in the "Paris–Berlin–Monte Carlo Intercommercial Company." A handful of cranks were out to corner me and would hound me until I dropped in my tracks. I was undoubtedly the scapegoat for all these madmen. I was the weakest of the lot. I didn't stand

a chance of surviving. The times we lived in demanded extraordinary feats of heroism or crime. And there I was, a total miscast. Weathercock. Puppet. I close my eyes to recall the scents and songs of those days. Yes, there was a whiff of rot in the air. Especially at dusk. I must say the twilight was never more beautiful. Summer lingered on and would not die. Vacant avenues. Paris without people. A clock tolling. And that omnipresent odor clinging to the façades of buildings and the leaves of the chestnuts. As for the songs, they were: "Swing Troubadour," "Star of Rio," "I Don't Know How It Will End," "Reginella." . . . Remember. The lights in the metro cars were tinted lavender, so it was hard to distinguish the other passengers. On my right, so close at hand, the searchlight atop the Eiffel Tower. I was returning from the Rue Boisrobert. The metro came to a halt on the Pont de Passy. I was hoping it would never start up again and that no one would come to snatch me from this nether world between two shores. Nothing stirred. Not a sound. Peace at last. Dissolve myself in the dusk. I forgot the sharp flare of their voices, the way they thumped me on the back, their relentless tugging and twisting that tied me in knots. My fear gave way to a kind of numbness. I followed the searchlight's path. Round and round it circled like a watchman on his night beat. Wearily. Its beam would gradually fade, until just a feeble shaft of light remained. I, too, after countless rounds, endless trips and returns, would finally vanish

into the shadows. Without ever knowing what it was all about. Sèvres-Lecourbe to Passy. Passy to Sèvres-Lecourbe. About ten o'clock each morning I'd appear at headquarters on the Rue Boisrobert. Warm welcoming handshakes. Smiles and confident glances from those gallant fellows. "What's new, Lamballe?" the Lieutenant would ask me. I was giving him increasingly detailed information on the "Paris–Berlin–Monte Carlo Intercommercial Company." Yes, it was in fact a police unit assigned to do some extremely "dirty work." The two owners, Henri Normand and Georges Philibert, hired their people from the underworld. Burglars, panders, criminals up for deportation. Two or three under the death sentence. They all had police cards and gun permits. A private world of crime operated out of the vice den on Cimarosa Square. Sharpers, drug addicts, charlatans, demimondaines, thriving and multiplying as they do in "troubled times." These people were protected by the higher-ups and carried on the foulest types of extortion. It even appeared that their chief, Henri Normand, had his way with the local police authorities as well as the central bureau on the Seine, if those organs still existed. As I went on with my story, I watched the dismay and disgust spread over their faces. Only the Lieutenant remained impassive. "Good work, Lamballe! Keep at it. And get up a complete list, please, of the members of the Cimarosa Square office."

Then one morning they seemed to be in an unusually somber mood. The Lieutenant cleared his throat: "Lam-

balle, you're going to have to commit murder." I accepted the statement calmly as if I'd been expecting it for some time. "We're counting on you, Lamballe, to get rid of Normand and Philibert. Choose the perfect moment." There was a pause during which Saint-Georges, Pernety, Jasmin, and all the rest of them stared at me with troubled eyes. The Lieutenant sat motionless at his desk. Corvisart handed me a cognac. The condemned man's last, I thought. I saw the distinct outline of a scaffold in the center of the room. The Lieutenant took the role of executioner. His staff members would watch the execution, smiling mournfully at me. "Well, Lamballe? What do you think?" "Sounds fine to me," I replied. I wanted to burst into tears and disclose my tenuous position as double agent. But there are things you have to keep to yourself. I've always been sparing of words. Not the expansive sort. But the others were always eager to pour out their feelings to me. I recall spending long afternoons with the boys of the R.K.S. We used to wander all around the neighborhood of the Rue Boisrobert, in the Vaugirard district. I'd listen to their rambling talk. Pernety dreamed of a just world. His cheeks would turn bright red. He'd take pictures from his wallet of Robespierre and André Breton. I pretended to admire these two men. Pernety kept talking about "Revolution," "Moral awakening," "Our role as intellectuals" in a brittle voice that I found extremely unpleasant. He had a pipe and black leather shoes—details which move me. Corvisart agonized over

his bourgeois background. He wanted so much to forget Parc Monceau, the tennis courts at Aix-les-Bains and the sugarplums from Plouvier's he'd sample at his cousins' weekly tea. He asked me whether it was possible to be both a Socialist and a Christian. As for Jasmin, he wanted to see France more tightly knit. He had the highest esteem for Henri de Bournazel and could name every star in the sky. Obligado put out a "political journal." "We must express ourselves," he explained to me. "It's an obligation. I can't keep silent." But silence is very simple to learn: a couple of boots in the jaw will do the trick. Picpus showed me his fiancée's letters. Have just a little more patience: according to him, the nightmare wouldn't last. Soon we'd be living in a contented world. We'd tell our children about the ordeals we suffered. Saint-Georges, Marbeuf, and Pelleport came out of Saint-Cyr with a lust for soldiering and the firm resolve to meet death with a battle cry on their lips. As for myself, I thought of Cimarosa Square, where I'd have to turn in my daily report. How lucky these boys were to be able to daydream. The Vaugirard district encouraged it. Tranquil, inviolate, like some remote hamlet. The very name "Vaugirard" evoked greenery, ivy, a moss-bound brook. In such a refuge they could well afford to launch their most heroic visions. They had nothing to lose. I was the one they sent out to tussle with reality, and I was struggling against the current. The sublime, evidently, was not for me. In the late afternoon, before boarding the metro,

I'd sit down on a bench in the Place Adolphe Chérioux and bask for a few last moments in the peace of this village. A cottage and a garden. Monastery or home for the aged? I could hear the trees murmuring. A cat wandered by in front of the church. From nowhere, a tender voice reached me: Fred Gouin singing "Sending Flowers." And I forgot that I had no future. My life would take a new course. With a little patience, as Picpus used to say, I'd come out of the nightmare alive. I'd get a job as bartender in some inn outside Paris. BARTENDER. Exactly what seemed to suit my inclinations and my ability. You stay behind the BAR. It protects you from the others. At least they're not hostile to you and simply want to order drinks. You mix and serve them rapidly. The most aggressive ones thank you. BARTENDING was a far nobler occupation than was generally allowed, the only one on a par with detective work or medicine. What did it involve? Mixing cocktails. Daydreams, in a sense. An antidote for pain. At the bar they beg you for it. Curaçao? Marie Brizard? Ether? Whatever they want. After two or three drinks they get sentimental, they stagger, roll their eyes, embark on all-night accounts of their sufferings and their crimes, beseech you to console them. Hitler, between hiccups, implores your forgiveness. "What are you thinking about, Lamballe?" "Flies and spies, Lieutenant." Once in a while he'd keep me in his office for a little "heart-to-heart chat." "I know you'll commit this murder. I trust you, Lamballe." His voice was command-

ing, his deep-blue eyes were piercing. Tell him the truth? And which truth, anyway? Double agent? or triple? By this time I didn't know who I was. Lieutenant, I DO NOT EXIST. I've never had an identity card. He would dismiss this as utter nonsense at a time when one was expected to steel oneself and display great strength of character. One evening I was alone with him. My weariness, like a rat, gnawed at everything around me. The walls suddenly seemed robed in somber velvet, clouds of mist enveloped the room, blurring the outlines of the furniture: the desk, the chairs, the Norman cupboard. He asked: "What's new, Lamballe?" in a faraway voice that was startling. The Lieutenant stared at me in his customary way, but his eyes had lost their metallic glint. He sat at the desk, his head bent to the right, his cheek almost nestling on his shoulder, the pensive and forlorn image of certain Florentine angels I had seen. He repeated: "What's new, Lamballe?" the same way he might have said: "It really doesn't matter," and his eyes rested wearily on me. A look so benign, so full of sadness that I felt Lieutenant Dominique had understood everything and forgave me: for being a double (or triple) agent, for my bewilderment at feeling like a straw in the wind and for the wrong I was doing whether through cowardice or inadvertence. For the first time, someone was taking an interest in me. This concern was totally confusing. I tried vainly to voice some expression of gratitude. The Lieutenant's eyes grew more and more compassionate, his harsh features had

softened. His chest sagged. Soon the only vestige of this brimming arrogance and vitality was a kindly and feeble old granny. The tumult of the outside world broke against the velvet-hung walls. We were gliding through downy darkness to depths where our sleep would be undisturbed. Paris, too, was engulfed. From the cabin I could see the Eiffel Tower's beam: a lighthouse marking our approach to shore. We would never reach it. It didn't matter. "Time for sleep, son," the Lieutenant murmured. "SLEEP." His eyes shot a parting gleam into the shadows. SLEEP. "What are you thinking about, Lamballe?" He shakes my shoulders. In a ringing voice: "Prepare yourself for this murder. The network's fate lies in your hands. Don't fail us." He paces the room nervously. The familiar harshness of things had returned. "Guts, Lamballe. I'm counting on you." The metro gets under way. Cambronne—La Motte-Picquet—Dupleix—Grenelle—Passy. Nine in the evening. Back on the corner of the Rues Franklin and Vineuse I found the white Bentley the Khedive had lent me in return for my services. It would have made a bad impression on the boys of the R.K.S. Riding around in an expensive car these days implied dubious activities. Only black marketeers and well-paid informers could afford such a luxury. What's the difference? Weariness dispelled the last of my scruples. I drove slowly across the Place du Trocadéro. A quiet motor. Soft leather seats. I was very fond of this Bentley. The Khedive had found it in a garage in Neuilly. I opened the glove compartment: the

owner's registration papers were still there. In short, a stolen car. One day or another we'd have to account for this. What would I plead in court when they read off a list of so many crimes committed by the "Paris–Berlin–Monte Carlo Intercommercial Company"? A gang of criminals, the judge would say. Exploiters of universal suffering and confusion. "Monsters," Madeleine Jacob would write. I turned on the radio.

Je suis seul
ce soir
avec ma peine . . .

Avenue Kléber, my heart beat a little faster. The front of the Baltimore Hotel. Cimarosa Square. Codébo and Robert le Pâle were standing guard in front of No. 3 *bis*. Codébo gave me a smile that displayed his gold teeth. I walked up one flight and opened the living-room door. The Khedive, in a dusty-pink silk brocade dressing gown, motioned to me. Mr. Philibert was checking file cards: "How's the R.K.S. doing, Swing Troubadour?" The Khedive gave me a sharp rap on the shoulder and a cognac: "Very scarce. Three hundred thousand francs a bottle. Don't worry. There are no shortages at Cimarosa Square. And the R.K.S.? What's new there?" No, I still hadn't obtained the addresses of the "Knights of the Shadows." By the end of the week, for sure. "Supposing we set our roundup on the Rue Boisrobert for some afternoon when

all the R.K.S. members are there? What do you say to that, Troubadour?" I discouraged this plan. It would be better to arrest them individually. "We've no time to lose, Troubadour." I calmed their impatience, promising again to come up with some definite information. Sooner or later they'd press me so hard that to get them off my back I'd have to keep my promises. The "haul" would take place. I would finally earn that epithet "stool pigeon"—the one that made my heart skip, my head reel, every time I heard it. STOOL PIGEON. Still, I tried to postpone the deadline by assuring my two bosses that the R.K.S. group was innocuous. Dreamy-eyed kids. Full of ideals, nothing more. Why not let the blessed idiots be? They had a particular disease: youth, which you get over pretty fast. In a few months they'd be much more tractable. Even the Lieutenant would abandon the struggle. And anyway, was there any struggle other than a heated debate with constantly recurring words like Justice, Progress, Truth, Democracy, Freedom, Revolution, Honor, and Patriotism? The whole thing struck me as completely harmless. As I saw it, the only dangerous man was LAM-BALLE, whom I'd not yet identified. Invisible. Elusive. The real brains behind the R.K.S. He would act, indeed, and with the utmost brutality. The very mention of his name at the Rue Boisrobert evoked murmurs of awe and admiration. LAM-BALLE! Who was he? When I put this question to the Lieutenant, he evaded it. "LAMBALLE will take care of the gangsters and traitors who have the upper hand

just now. LAMBALLE strikes swiftly and surely. We shall obey LAMBALLE blindly. LAMBALLE is never wrong. LAMBALLE is a tremendous person. LAMBALLE, our only hope. . . ." I couldn't get any more definite information. With a little patience we'd unmask the mystery man. I kept telling the Khedive and Philibert that capturing Lamballe ought to be our sole target. LAM-BALLE! The others weren't important. A nice bunch of babblers. I asked that they be spared. "We'll see. First get details on this Lamballe person. Understand?" The Khedive's mouth curled up in a menacing leer. Philibert, looking pensive, stroked his mustache and murmured: "LAM–BALLE, LAM-BALLE." "I'll settle this LAMBALLE's hash," the Khedive concluded, "and neither London, Vichy, nor the Americans will be able to save him. Cognac? Craven? Help yourself, my boy." "We've just made a deal for the Sebastiano del Piombo," announced Philibert. "Here's your 10 per cent commission." He handed me a pale-green envelope. "Get me some Asian bronzes for tomorrow. We've got a client." I rather enjoyed these sideline jobs they gave me: locating works of art and delivering them straight to Cimarosa Square. In the morning I'd enter the homes of the wealthy who'd left Paris on the heels of events. All I had to do was pick a lock or get a key from the caretaker by showing my police card. I searched abandoned houses from cellar to attic. The owners had left numerous unimportant items behind: pastels, vases, tapestries, books, illuminated manuscripts. That wasn't enough. I looked for

storerooms, vaults, places where, in periods of uncertainty, extremely valuable collections might be hidden. An attic in the suburbs rewarded me with Gobelin tapestries and Persian carpets, a musty garage at Porte Champferret was crammed with old masters. In a cellar in Auteuil, a foot locker containing antique and Renaissance jewelry. I went about my looting cheerfully and even with a sense of pleasure that I would regret—later on—in court. We were living in extraordinary times. Stolen objects and black-marketeering converted into ready cash, and the Khedive, justly appraising my talents, used me for tracking down works of art rather than precious objects of nonferrous metal. I was grateful for this. I experienced great esthetic pleasures. For example, standing before a Goya depicting the assassination of the Princess de Lamballe. The owner had tried to save it by hiding it in a vault at the Franco-Serbian Bank at 3 Rue Helder. All I had to do was show my police card and they turned over this masterpiece to me. We sold all the looted property. A strange time. It will turn me into a rather "unsavory" character. Finger man, looter, murderer perhaps. I was no worse than the next man. I followed the trend, simple as that. I'm not unduly attracted to evil. One day I met an old gentleman covered with rings and laces. He told me in his quavering voice that he clipped out pictures of criminals from *Detective* magazine, for he found a "savage" and "malevolent" beauty in their faces. He admired their "unalterable" and "lofty" solitude and mentioned

one of them, Eugene Weidmann, calling him the "angel of the shadows." This old fellow was a literary man. I told him that on the day of Weidmann's execution he wore crepe-soled shoes. His mother had bought them for him in Frankfort some time back. And that if you really cared for people, humble details of this sort deserve your attention. The rest was unimportant. Poor Weidmann! At this very moment Hitler has gone to sleep sucking his thumb, and I glance pityingly at him. He yelps, like a dreaming dog. He curls up, shrivels steadily, inch by inch; he would fit in the palm of my hand. "What are you thinking about, Swing Troubadour?" "About our Führer, Mr. Philibert." "We're going to sell the Frans Hals very shortly. You get a 15 per cent commission for your trouble. If you help us capture Lamballe, I'll give you a five hundred thousand franc bonus. Enough to set you up royally. Have a cognac?" My head is reeling. Probably the scent of the flowers. The living room was buried under the dahlias and the orchids. A colossal rose-bush between the two windows partly hid the self-portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro. Ten in the evening. One after another they poured into the room. The Khedive greeted them in a plum-colored tuxedo flecked with green. Mr. Philibert gave them a slight nod and returned to his files. Now and then he would walk up to one of them, exchange a few words, make some notes. The Khedive was passing around drinks, cigarettes, and petits fours. M. and Mme de Bel-Respiro would have been amazed to find

such a gathering in their living room: there was the "Marquis" Lionel de Zieff, convicted of larceny, breach of trust, receiving stolen property, and illegal possession of decorations; Costachesco, a Roumanian banker, stock market manipulations and fraudulent bankruptcies; "Baron" Gaétan de Lussatz, society gigolo, holder of both French and Monegasque passports; Pols de Helder, gentleman-burglar; Rachid von Rosenheim, Mr. Germany of 1938, professional sharper; Jean-Farouk de Méthode, owner of the Cirque d'Automne and L'Heure Mauve, procurer, outlawed throughout the British Commonwealth; Ferdinand Poupet, alias "Paulo Hayakawa," insurance broker, ex-convict, forgery and use of forged documents; Otto da Silva, "The Rich Planter," part-time spy; "Count" Baruzzi, art expert and drug addict; Darquier, alias "de Pellepoix," bogus lawyer; Ivanoff the Oracle, Bulgarian phony, "official tattooist for the Coptic Church"; Odicharvi, police spy in White Russian circles; Mickey de Voisins, *"La Soubrette,"* homosexual prostitute; Costantini, former air force commandant; Jean Le Houleux, journalist, ex-treasurer of the Club du Pavois, and blackmailer; the Chapochnikoff brothers, the exact number of whom or what they did for a living I never knew. Several women: Lucie Onstein, alias "Frau Sultana," strip-teaser at Rigolett's; Magda d'Andurian, who ran a high-class "hotel" in Palmyra, Syria; Violette Morris, weight-lifting champion, always dressed like a man; Emprosine Marousi, Byzantine princess, drug addict and

lesbian; Simone Bouquereau and Irène de Tranzé, permanently on call at the One-Two-Two Club; "Baroness" Lydia Stahl, who adored champagne and fresh flowers. All these people were regular visitors to No. 3 *bis*. They had sprung up in the blackout, in an era of despair and want, through a phenomenon much like spontaneous generation. Most of them had key jobs with the "Paris–Berlin–Monte Carlo Intercommercial Company." Zieff, Méthode, and Helder were in charge of the leather department. Through clever agents they obtained carloads of calfskin which the P.B.M.C.I. Co. resold at twelve times the market price. Costachesco, Hayakawa, and Rosenheim specialized in metals, fats, and mineral oils. Ex-Commandant Costantini operated in a narrower but still lucrative sector: glassware, perfumes, chamois, biscuits, screws, and bolts. The others were singled out by the Khedive for the more sensitive jobs. Lussatz had custody of the funds which arrived in great quantity each morning at Cimarosa Square. Da Silva and Odicharvi tracked down gold and foreign currency. Mickey de Voisins, Baruzzi, and "Baroness" Lydia Stahl catalogued the contents of private houses where there were works of art for me to seize. Hayakawa and Jean Le Houleux took care of the office accounts. Darquier served as counsel. As for the Chapochnikoff brothers, they had no definite function and simply fluttered around. Simone Bouquereau and Irène de Tranzé were the Khedive's official secretaries. Princess Marousi arranged useful little matters for

us in social and banking circles. Frau Sultana and Violette Morris made a great deal of money as informers. Magda d'Andurian, an aggressive, hardheaded woman, canvassed the North of France and would come up with quantities of tarpaulin and woolens. And finally, let's not overlook the staff members who confined themselves solely to police work: Tony Breton, a fop, noncom in the Foreign Legion, and veteran extortionist; Jo Reocreux, who ran a bordello; Vital-Léca, known as "Golden Throat," hired killer; Armand le Fou: "I'll tear 'em apart, every last one of 'em"; Codébo and Robert le Pâle, up for deportation, working as porters and bodyguards; Danos "the Mammoth," otherwise known as "Big Bill"; Gouari, "the American," gunman for hire by the hour. The Khedive ruled over this cheerful little community which subsequent annals of the law will designate as "the Cimarosa Square Gang." Meanwhile, business was in full swing. Zieff was toying with plans to take over the Victorine, Eldorado, and Folies-Wagram studios; Helder was organizing a "stock company" to control every hotel along the Riviera; Costachesco bought up real estate by the block; Rosenheim announced that "the whole of France will soon be ours for the asking, to resell to the highest bidder." I watched and listened to these lunatics. Their faces, under the light from the chandeliers, were dripping sweat. Their talk grew staccato. Rebates, brokerage fees, commissions, supplies on hand, carloads, profit margins. The Chapochnikoff brothers, in ever-growing numbers,

were tirelessly refilling champagne glasses. Frau Sultana cranked the victrola. Johnny Hess:

Get into the mood,
Forget your worries. . . .

She unbuttoned her blouse, broke into a jazz step. The others followed suit. Codébo, Danos, and Robert le Pâle entered the living room. They wove their way among the dancers, reached Mr. Philibert, and whispered a few words in his ear. I was looking out the window. An auto with no lights in front of No. 3 *bis*. Vital-Léca held a flashlight, Reocreux opened the car door. A man, in handcuffs. Gouari shoved him brutally toward the entrance. I thought of the Lieutenant, the boys of Vaugirard. Some night I'd see them all in chains like this one. Breton would give them the shock treatment. After that . . . Can I go on living with this remorse? Pernety and his black leather shoes. Picpus and his girl's letters. The periwinkle-blue eyes of Saint-Georges. Their dreams, all their wonderful fantasies would come to an end between the blood-spattered cellar walls of No. 3 *bis*. Because of me. And don't think I use these terms lightly: "shock treatment," "blackout," "finger man," "hired killer." I'm reporting what I've seen, what I've lived through. With no embellishments. I'm not inventing a thing. Every single person I mention has existed. I'm even going so far as to give their actual names. As for my own tastes, I rather like

hollyhocks, moonlit gardens, the tango of happier days. A shopgirl's heart. I've been unlucky. You could hear their groans rising from the basement, stifled at last by the music. Johnny Hess:

Now I'm here
Now there's rhythm
To wing you away. . . .

Frau Sultana was enticing them with shrill cries. Ivanoff waved his "lighter-than-iron rod." They jostled each other, gasped for breath, their dancing grew spasmodic, they upset a vase of dahlias in their path, resumed their wild gesticulating.

Music is
the magic potion. . . .

The door was flung open. Codébo and Danos held him up by the armpits. The handcuffs were still on him. His face dripped blood. He staggered, collapsed in the middle of the living room. The others remained motionless, waiting. Only the Chapochnikoff brothers moved about, as if nothing was happening, gathering up the fragments of a vase, straightening the flowers. One of them stole toward Baroness Lydia with an offering of orchids.

"If we ran into this type of wise guy every day it would be pretty rough for us," declared Mr. Philibert. "Take it

easy, Pierre. He'll end up talking." "I don't think so, Henri." "Then we'll make a martyr of him. There have to be martyrs, it seems." "Martyrs are sheer nonsense," declared Lionel de Zieff in a gummy voice. "You refuse to talk?" Mr. Philibert asked him. "We won't ask you much longer," murmured the Khedive. "If you don't answer it means you don't know anything." "But if you know something," said Mr. Philibert, "you'd better come out with it now."

He raised his head. A red stain on the Savonnerie carpet, where his head had lain. An ironic glint in his periwinkle-blue eyes (the same as Saint-Georges'). Or rather contempt. People have been known to die for their beliefs. The Khedive hit him three times. His eyes never moved. Violette Morris threw a glass of champagne in his face. "My dear fellow," whispered Ivanoff the Oracle, "won't you show me your left hand?" People die for their beliefs. The Lieutenant would keep saying to me: "All of us are ready to die for our beliefs. Are you, Lamballe?" I didn't dare tell him that my death could only result from disease, fear, or despair. "Catch!" shouted Zieff, and the cognac bottle hit him squarely in the face. "Your hand, your left hand," Ivanoff the Oracle implored. "He'll talk," sighed Frau Sultana, "he'll talk, I know he will," and she bared her shoulders with an inveigling smile. "All this blood . . ." mumbled Baroness Lydia Stahl. His head rested once more on the Savonnerie carpet. Danos lifted him up and dragged him out of the

living room. Moments later, Tony Breton announced in a hollow voice: "He's dead, he died without talking." Frau Sultana turned her back with a shrug. Ivanoff was off in space, his eyes searching the ceiling. "You have to admit there are still a few gutsy guys around," commented Pols de Helder.

"Obstinate, you mean," retorted "Count" Baruzzi. "I almost admire him," declared Mr. Philibert. "He's the first I've seen put up such resistance." The Khedive: "Fellows like that one, Pierre, are SABOTAGING our work." Midnight. A kind of torpor gripped them. They settled themselves on the sofas, on the hassocks, in the armchairs. Simone Bouquereau touched up her make-up in the large Venetian mirror. Ivanoff was intently studying Baroness Lydia Stahl's left hand. The others launched into trivial chatter. About that time the Khedive took me over to the window to talk of his appointment as "police commissioner," which he felt certain was imminent. He thought about it constantly. Childhood in the prison colony of Eysses. Then the penal battalion in Africa and Fresnes prison. Pointing to the portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro, he named every single decoration on the man's chest. "Just substitute my head for his. Find me a good painter. As of now, my name is Henri de Bel-Respiro." He repeated, marveling: "Commissioner Henri de Bel-Respiro." Such a thirst for respectability astounded me, for I had recognized it once before in my father, Alexander Stavisky. I always keep with me the letter he wrote my mother

before taking his own life: "What I ask above all is that you bring up our son to value honor and integrity; and, when he has reached the awkward age of fifteen, that you supervise his activities and associations so he may get a healthy start in life and become an honest man." I believe he would have chosen to end his days in some small provincial city. In peace and tranquility after years of tumult, agitation, mirages and bewildering turmoil. My poor father! "You'll see, when I'm police commissioner everything will be fine." The others were chatting in low voices. One of the Chapochnikoff brothers brought in a tray of orangeades. Were it not for the bloodstain in the middle of the living room and the array of gaudy clothes, the scene might have passed for a highly respectable gathering. Mr. Philibert was straightening his files and sat down at the piano. He dusted off the keyboard with his handkerchief and opened a piece of music. He played the Adagio from the *Moonlight Sonata.* 'Melomaniac," whispered the Khedive. "An artist to the fingertips. I sometimes wonder why he spends any time with us. Such a talented fellow! Listen to him!" I felt my eyes swelling uncontrollably because of an intense despair that had drained every tear, a weariness so overwhelming that it sparked my senses. I felt I had always walked in darkness to the rhythm of that throbbing and persistent music. Shadows gripped the lapels of my jacket, pulling me in opposite directions, calling me first "Lamballe," then "Swing Troubadour," pushing me from Passy to Sèvres-

Lecourbe, from Sèvres-Lecourbe to Passy, and all the while I hadn't the faintest idea what it was all about. The world was filled indeed with sound and fury. No matter. I went straight through the heart of this turbulence, wooden as a sleepwalker. Eyes wide open. Things would quiet down in the end. The slow melody Philibert was playing would gradually invade everyone and everything. Of that I was absolutely certain. They had left the living room. A note from the Khedive on the console table: "Try to deliver Lamballe as quickly as possible. We must have him." The sound of their motors grew fainter. Then, standing in front of the Venetian mirror, I pronounced ever so distinctly: I AM THE PRIN–CESS DE LAM–BALLE. I looked myself squarely in the eye, pressed my forehead to the mirror: I am the Princess de Lamballe. Killers trail you in the dark. They grope about, brush against you, stumble over the furniture. The seconds seem interminable. You hold your breath. Will they find the light switch? Let's get it over with. I won't be able to hold out much longer against the dizziness. I'll walk up to the Khedive with my eyes wide open and stick my face right under his nose: I AM THE PRIN–CESS DE LAM–BALLE, head of the R.K.S. Unless Lieutenant Dominique gets up suddenly. In a somber voice: "There's an informer among us. Someone named 'Swing Troubadour.'" "It's I, Lieutenant." I looked up. A moth circled from one light bulb to the next, and to keep his wings from being scorched I turned out the chandelier. No one would ever

exhibit such thoughtfulness on my behalf. I had to fend for myself. Mama was faraway: Lausanne. A good thing, too. My poor father, Alexander Stavisky, was dead. Lili Marlene had forgotten me. Alone. I didn't belong anywhere. At either the Rue Boisrobert or Cimarosa Square. On the Left Bank, I concealed my job as informer from those brave boys of the R.K.S.; on the Right Bank, the "Princess de Lamballe" title created some serious problems for me. Who was I really? My papers? A Nansen false passport. Universally unwelcome. My precarious situation kept me from sleeping. No matter. In addition to my secondary job of "recouping" valuable objects, I acted as night watchman at No. 3 *bis*. After Mr. Philibert and the guests had left, I could have enjoyed the privacy of M. de Bel-Respiro's bedroom, but I stayed in the living room. The lamp under its mauve shade cast deep bands of twilight around me. I opened a book: *The Mysterious Knight of Eon*. After a few minutes it slipped from my hand. A sudden realization struck me: I would never get out of this mess alive. The wistful harmonies of the Adagio echoed in my ears. The flowers in the living room were losing their petals and I was growing old at an alarming rate. Standing for the last time in front of the Venetian mirror, I saw there the face of Philippe Pétain. I found him far too bright-eyed, too rosy-cheeked, and so I changed into King Lear. Perfectly understandable. Here's the reason: ever since childhood I had been storing up vast reservoirs of tears which I had never been

able to release from my body. Tears, they say, are a great comfort, and despite daily efforts, I never experienced this pleasure. So the tears ate out my insides, like an acid, which accounts for my rapid aging. The doctor had warned me: At twenty, you'll be able to double for King Lear. An incurable disease. In medical terms it's known as PROGERIA. I should have liked to paint a more dashing picture of myself. Am I to blame? I started out with impeccable health and indestructible morals, but I've known great sorrow. So painful that I couldn't sleep. From staying open so long, my eyes became extraordinarily enlarged. They reach down to my jaw. One other thing: this PROGERIA of mine is contagious. If I so much as glance at or touch an object it crumbles to dust. In the living room the flowers were withering. The champagne glasses scattered over the console table, the desk, and the mantel suggested some celebration far in the past. Perhaps the ball on June 20, 1896, that M. de Bel-Respiro gave in honor of Camille du Gast, the cakewalk dancer. A forgotten umbrella, Turkish cigarette stubs, a half-finished orangeade. Was that Philibert playing the piano just a while ago? Or Mlle Mylo d'Arcille, who had died some sixty years before? The bloodstain brought me back to more current problems. I didn't know the poor devil's name. He looked like Saint-Georges. While they were working him over he had lost his pen and a handkerchief with the initials C.F.: the only traces of his presence on earth. . . .

I opened the window. A summer night so blue, so warm, that it seemed unreal and suddenly brought to my mind phrases like "give up the ghost" and "breathe one last sigh." The world was dying of consumption. A very mild, lingering death. The sirens wailed announcing an air raid. After that I could hear only a muffled drumroll. It lasted two or three hours. Phosphorus bombs. By dawn Paris would be a mass of debris. Too bad. Everything I loved about my city had long since ceased to exist: the Petite Ceinture railway, the Ternes balloon, the Pompeian Villa, and the Chinese Baths. You end up taking the disappearance of things for granted. The bombers would spare nothing. On the desk I arranged the playing pieces from a mah-jongg set that belonged to the son of the house. The walls trembled. They'd collapse any minute. But I hadn't finished what I was saying. From this old age and solitude of mine, something would blossom, like a bubble on the tip of a straw. I waited. It took shape all at once: a red-headed giant, unquestionably blind, since he wore dark glasses. A little girl with a wrinkled face. I called them Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. Wretched. Sickly. Always silent. A word, a gesture would have been enough to break them. What would have happened to them without me? I found at last the best of reasons to go on living. I loved my poor monsters. I would take care of them . . . No one would be able to harm them. The money I earned at Cimarosa Square for informing and looting assured them a comfortable life. Coco La-

cour. Esmeralda. I chose the two most miserable creatures on earth, but there was no sentimentality in my love. I would have bashed in the face of anyone who dared to make the slightest disparaging remark about them. The mere thought of it threw me into a murderous rage. Clusters of searing sparks scorched my eyes. I was choking. No one would lay a finger on my two children. My pent-up grief burst in a towering wave, and my love took strength from it. No living thing could resist its erosive power. A love so devastating that kings, conquerors, and "great men" changed into sick children before my eyes. Attila, Napoleon, Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Harun al-Rashid, and others of whose fabled feats I had heard. How puny and pitiful they seemed, these so-called titans. Absolutely harmless. To such a degree that as I bent over Esmeralda's face I wondered whether I wasn't gazing at Hitler. A slip of a girl, abandoned. She was blowing soap bubbles with a gadget I had just given her. Coco Lacour was lighting his cigar. From the very first time I met them they had never said a word. Mutes, undoubtedly. Esmeralda stared in disbelief at the bubbles bursting against the chandelier. Coco Lacour was totally absorbed in blowing smoke rings. Humble pleasures. I loved these sickly charges of mine. I enjoyed their company. Not that I found these two creatures any more moving or defenseless than the majority of mankind. EVERY HUMAN BEING left me with a sense of maternal and hopeless compassion. But Coco Lacour and Esmeralda

at least kept silent. They never moved. Silence, immobility, after having to put up with so many pointless exclamations and gesticulations. I felt no need to speak to them. What would be the purpose? They were deaf. And that was all to the good. Were I to confide my grief to a fellow man, he would desert me on the spot. I don't blame him. And anyway, my physical appearance discourages "soul mates." A bearded centenarian with eyes that are consuming his face. Who can comfort King Lear? One day during a nervous breakdown—as the English Jews put it—I was looking for a shoulder to lean on. Knowing the weight of my sadness, I thought the Colossus of Rhodes was in order. Well, it wasn't. No sooner did I step toward it than it crumbled to dust. No matter. I was soon cheerful again. The important thing was Coco Lacour and Esmeralda. At Cimarosa Square we lived together as a family. I forgot the Khedive and the Lieutenant. Gangsters or heroes, those fellows had worn me out. I never could get interested in what they had to talk about. I was planning for the future. Esmeralda would take piano lessons. Coco Lacour would play mah-jongg with me and learn jazz steps. I wanted to spoil them utterly, my two gazelles, my deaf-mutes. Give them the best education. I couldn't stop looking at them. My love was like my feeling for Mama: she, too, was such a tender thing. Shouldn't do that. It leaves you vulnerable to all the pain of life. Men behave

in one of two ways: like flunkeys when they're afraid of you, like murderers when they're free to prey on the defenseless. In any event, Mama was safe: LAUSANNE. As for Coco Lacour and Esmeralda, I was their shield. We would live in a cheerful house. It had always been mine. My papers? Maxime de Bel-Respiro was my name. In front of me, my father's self-portrait. In addition: *Memories*

in every drawer
perfume
in every closet . . .

We really had nothing to fear. The confusion and savagery of the world vanished on the doorstep of No. 3 *bis*. The hours passed, silently. Coco Lacour and Esmeralda would go up to bed. They'd fall asleep quickly. Of all the bubbles Esmeralda had blown, one alone still floated in the air. It rose, hesitantly, toward the ceiling. I held my breath. It broke against the chandelier. So everything was over. Coco Lacour and Esmeralda had never existed. I was alone in the living room listening to the downpour of phosphorus. One last wistful prayer for the quays along the Seine, the Gare d'Orsay, and the Petite Ceinture. Then I found myself at life's end in a part of Siberia called Kamchatka. Its soil bears no life. A bleak and arid region. Nights so endless they bring no rest. Man cannot

exist in such latitudes, and the biologists have observed that the human body decomposes into a thousand bursts of laughter: raucous, piercing like the fragments of shattered bottles. Here's the reason: in the midst of this polar desert you feel released from every link you ever had with the world. Death is all that awaits you. Death from laughter. Five in the morning. Or perhaps the close of day. A layer of ashes covered the living-room furniture. I was looking at the kiosk in the square and the statue of Toussaint L'Ouverture. There seemed to be a daguerreotype in front of my eyes. Then I walked through the house, floor by floor. Suitcases scattered about in every room. There hadn't been time to close them. One contained a hat from Kronstadt, a slate-gray tweed suit, the yellowed playbill from a show at the Ventadour theater, a photo autographed by the ice-skating team of Goodrich and Curtis, two keepsakes, a few old toys. I didn't have the courage to rummage through the others. They kept multiplying all around me: in iron, wicker, glass, Russia leather. Several wardrobe trunks lined the corridor. No. 3 *bis* was becoming a colossal railway baggage depot. Forgotten. This luggage was of no interest to anyone. It held the ghosts of many things: two or three walks in the Batignolles district with Lili Marlene, a kaleidoscope someone gave me for my seventh birthday, a cup of verbena Mama handed me one evening I don't recall how long ago. . . . The small details of a lifetime.

I would have liked to itemize them all minutely. What good would it do?

Time hurries by
and the years run out . . .
One day . . .

My name was Marcel Petiot. Alone with these piles of luggage. No use waiting. The train wasn't coming. I was a young man with no future. What had I done with my youth? The days went by and I heaped them up in utter confusion. Enough to fill some fifty-odd suitcases. Their bittersweet odor made me nauseous. I'll leave them here. They'll mildew right where they are. Get out of this house as fast as possible. Already the walls are starting to crumble and the self-portrait of M. de Bel-Respiro is moldering. Spiders diligently spin their webs among the chandeliers; smoke rises from the cellar. Some human remains are probably burning. Who am I? Petiot? Landru? In the hallway, a reeking green vapor clings to the wardrobe trunks. Get away. I'll take the wheel of the Bentley I left in front of the entrance last night. A last look up at No. 3 *bis*. One of those houses you dream of settling down in. Unfortunately, I entered it illegally. There was no place there for me. No matter. I turn on the radio:

Pauvre Swing Troubadour . . .

Avenue de Malakoff. The motor is silent. I glide over calm seas. Leaves are rustling. For the first time in my life I feel absolutely weightless.

Ton destin, Swing Troubadour . . .

I stop at the corner of Place Victor Hugo and the Rue Copernic. From my inside pocket I take the ivory-handled pistol studded with emeralds that I found in Mme de Bel-Respiro's nightstand.

Plus de printemps, Swing Troubadour . . .

I place the weapon on the seat. I wait. The cafés along the square are closed. Not a soul in the streets. A black, light 11-hp car, then two, then three, then four are coming down Victor Hugo. My heart beats wildly. They approach me and slow down. The first draws alongside the Bentley. The Khedive. His face is just a breath from mine, behind the window glass. He stares at me with gentle eyes. Then I feel as if my lips are curling into a horrible leer. Vertigo. I articulate very carefully so they can read my lips: I AM THE PRIN–CESS DE LAM–BALLE. I AM THE PRIN–CESS DE LAM–BALLE. I grab the pistol and lower the window. He watches me, smiling, as if he had always known. I pull the trigger. I've wounded his left shoulder. Now they're following me at a distance, but I know I shan't escape them. Their autos are advancing four

abreast. The strongarms of Cimarosa Square are in one of them: Breton, Reocreux, Codébo, Robert le Pâle, Danos, Gouari. . . . Vital-Léca is driving the Khedive's 11-hp. I caught sight of Lionel de Zieff, Helder, and Rosenheim in the back seat. I'm back on the Avenue de Malakoff headed for the Trocadéro. A blue-gray Talbot emerges from the Rue Lauriston: Philibert's. Then the Delahaye Labourdette that belongs to ex-Commandant Costantini. They've all gathered at the appointed place. The hunt is on. I drive very slowly. They keep to my speed. It must look like a funeral procession. I'm not hanging on *any* hopes: double agents die sooner or later after delaying the deadline by countless trips and returns, maneuvers, lies, and acrobatics. Exhaustion takes hold *very quickly*. There's nothing left to do but lie down on the ground, panting for breath, and wait for the final reckoning. You can't escape men. Avenue Henri-Martin. Boulevard Lannes. I drive at random. The others are about fifty yards behind me. How will they finish me off? Will Breton give me the shock treatment? They consider me an important catch: the "Princess de Lamballe," ringleader of the R.K.S. What's more, I've just taken a shot at the Khedive. My actions must strike them as very peculiar: haven't I delivered over to them all the "Knights of the Shadows"? I'll have to explain that. Will I have the strength? Boulevard Pereire. Who knows? Maybe a few years from now some lunatic will take an interest in this story. He'll give a lot of weight to the

"troubled period" we lived through, he'll read over old newspapers. He'll have a hard time analyzing my personality. What was my role at Cimarosa Square, core of one of the most notorious arms of the French Gestapo? And at the Rue Boisrobert among the patriots of the R.K.S.? I myself don't know. Avenue de Wagram.

La ville est comme un grand manège
dont chaque tour
nous vieillit un peu . . .

I was taking in the sights of Paris for the last time. Each street, each intersection brought back memories. Graff, where I met Lili Marlene. The Claridge Hotel, where my father stayed before he fled to Chamonix. The Mabille dance hall where I used to take Rosita Sergent. The others were letting me continue my odyssey. When would they decide to kill me? Their cars kept at a steady distance of about fifty yards behind me. We're on the boulevards. A summer evening such as I've never seen. Snatches of music from open windows. People sit at sidewalk cafés or stroll casually in groups. The street lights flicker and go on. A thousand Japanese lanterns glow amid the foliage. Laughter bursting all around. Confetti and waltzes on the accordion. To the east, a firework spraying pink and blue streamers. I feel that I'm living these moments in the past. We're wandering along the

quays of the Seine. The Left Bank, the apartment I lived in with my mother. The shutters are drawn.

Elle est partie
changement d'adresse . . .

We cross the Place du Châtelet. I see the Lieutenant and Saint-Georges struck down again, on the corner of the Avenue Victoria. I'll meet the same end before the night is over. Each in his own turn. Across the Seine, a dark mass: Austerlitz station. The trains haven't been running for ages. Quai de la Rapée. Quai de Bercy. We're coming into completely deserted sections. Why don't they take advantage of it? Any one of these warehouses would do—it seems to me—for the payoff. The moon is so bright that we all have the same idea of driving without lights. Charenton-le-Pont. We've left Paris. I cry a little. I loved that city. My native ground. My Inferno. My aging mistress with too much make-up. Champigny-sur-Marne. When will they make up their minds? I want to get it over with. The faces of those I love appear for the last time. Pernety: what happened to his pipe and his black leather shoes? Corvisart: he moved me, that blockhead. Jasmin: one evening we were crossing the Place Adolphe Cherioux and he pointed to a star overhead: "That's Betelgeuse." He lent me a biography of Henri de Bournazel. As I turned its pages I came across an old photo

of him in a sailor suit. Obligado: his mournful face. He would often read me excerpts from his political journal. Those pages are now rotting in some drawer. Picpus: his fiancée? Saint-Georges, Marbeuf, and Pelleport. Their solid handshakes and loyal eyes. The walks around Vaugirard. Our first meeting in front of Joan of Arc's statue. The Lieutenant's commanding voice. We've just passed Villeneuve-le-Roi. Other faces loom: my father, Alexander Stavisky. He would be ashamed of me. He wanted me to get into Saint-Cyr. Mama. She's in Lausanne, and I can join her. I step on the gas. I'm shaking off my murderers. I've plenty of cash on me. Enough to close the eyes of the most alert Swiss border guards. But I'm far too worn out. I long for rest. The real kind. Lausanne wouldn't do. Have they come to a decision? In the mirror I see the Khedive's 11-hp coming closer, closer. No. It slows down abruptly. They're playing cat and mouse. I listened to the radio to pass the time.

Je suis seul
ce soir
avec ma peine . . .

Coco Lacour and Esmeralda did not exist. I had thrown over Lili Marlene. Denounced the brave boys of the R.K.S. Lots of people perish on the highways. All those faces should be preserved, engagements kept, promises upheld. Impossible. I walked out instantly. Fleeing the

scene of a crime. That kind of game can destroy you. Anyway, I've never known who I was. I authorize my biographer to simply call me "a man," and I wish him luck. I've been unable to lengthen my stride, my breath, or my sentences. He won't understand the first thing about this story. Neither do I. We're even.

L'Hay-les-Roses. We've gone through other townships. Now and then the Khedive's 11-hp would pass me. Ex-Commandant Costantini and Philibert drove along flanking me for about a mile. I thought my time was up. Not yet. They were letting me gain ground. My head bumps against the steering wheel. There are poplars lining the road. One slip will do it. I keep going, half asleep.

A Note About the Author

Patrick Modiano was born in 1947 in Paris, where he still lives. He received his secondary education at various colleges: Biarritz, Versailles, Chamonix, and Paris. His first novel, LA PLACE DE L'ÉTOILE, *published in France in 1963, won the Prix Roger Nimier. This novel, his first to be published in English, has won the Prix Felix Fénéon, 1969, and the Prix de la plume de diamant, also 1969.*

A Note on the Type

This book was set on the Linotype in Granjon, a type named in compliment to Robert Granjon, type cutter and printer in Antwerp, Lyons, Rome, Paris—active from 1523 to 1590. Granjon, the boldest and most original designer of his time, was one of the first to practice the trade of type-founder apart from that of printer.

Linotype Granjon was designed by George W. Jones, who based his drawings on a face used by Claude Garamond (1510–1561) in his beautiful French books. Granjon more closely resembles Garamond's own type than do any of the various modern faces that bear his name.

The book was composed, printed, and bound by H. Wolff, New York. The typography and binding design are by Betty Anderson.