

# ONE

THE BOULEVARD DU CANGE was a broad, quiet street that marked the eastern flank of the city of Amiens. The wagons that rolled in from Lille and Arras to the north made directly into the tanneries and mills of the Saint-Leu quarter without needing to use this rutted, leafy road. The town side of the boulevard backed on to substantial gardens which were squared off and apportioned with civic precision to the houses they adjoined. On the damp grass were chestnut trees, lilac and willows, cultivated to give shade and quietness to their owners. The gardens had a wild, overgrown look and their deep lawns and bursting hedges could conceal small clearings, quiet pools, and areas unvisited even by the inhabitants, where patches of grass and wild flowers lay beneath the branches of overhanging trees.

Behind the gardens the river Somme broke up into small canals that were the picturesque feature of Saint-Leu; on the other side of the boulevard these had been made into a series of water-gardens, little islands of damp fertility divided by the channels of the split river. Long, flat-bottomed boats propelled by poles took the town-dwellers through the waterways on Sunday afternoons. All along the river and its streams sat fishermen, slumped on their rods; in hats and coats beneath the cathedral and in shirtsleeves by the banks of the water-gardens, they dipped their lines in search of trout or carp.

The Azaires' house showed a strong, formal front towards the road from behind iron railings. The traffic looping down

towards the river would have been in no doubt that this was the property of a substantial man. The slate roof plunged in conflicting angles to cover the irregular shape of the house. Beneath one of them a dormer window looked out on to the boulevard. The first floor was dominated by a stone balcony over whose balustrades the red creeper had made its way up to the roof. There was a formidable front door with iron facings on the timber.

Inside, the house was both smaller and larger than it looked. It had no rooms of intimidating grandeur, no gilt ball-rooms with dripping chandeliers, yet it had unexpected spaces and corridors that disclosed new corners with steps down into the gardens; there were small salons equipped with writing desks and tapestry-covered chairs that opened inwards from unregarded passageways. Even from the end of the lawn it was difficult to see how the rooms and corridors were fitted into the placid rectangles of stone. Throughout the building the floors made distinctive sounds beneath the press of feet, so that with its closed angles and echoing air the house was always a place of unseen footsteps.

Stephen Wraysford's metal trunk had been sent ahead and was waiting at the foot of the bed. He unpacked his clothes and hung his spare suit in the giant carved wardrobe. There was an enamel wash bowl and wooden towel rail beneath the window. He had to stand on tiptoe to look out over the boulevard where a cab was waiting on the other side of the street, the horse shaking its harness and reaching up its neck to nibble at the branches of a lime tree. He tested the resilience of the bed, then lay down on it, resting his head on the concealed bolster. The room was simple but had been decorated with some care. There was a vase of wild flowers on the table and prints of street scenes in Honfleur on either side of the door.

It was a spring evening with a late sun in the sky beyond the cathedral and the sounds of blackbirds from either side of the house. Stephen washed perfunctorily and tried to flatten his black hair in the small looking glass. He placed half a dozen cigarettes in a metal case which he tucked inside his jacket. He emptied his pockets of items he no longer needed: railway

tickets, a blue leather notebook and a knife with a single, scrupulously sharpened, blade.

He went downstairs to dinner, startled by the sound of his steps on the two staircases that took him to the landing of the first floor and the family bedrooms, and thence down to the hall. He felt hot beneath his waistcoat and jacket. He stood for a moment disorientated, unsure which of the four glass-panelled doors that opened off the hall was the one through which he was supposed to go. He half-opened one and found himself looking into a steam-filled kitchen in the middle of which a maid was loading plates on to a tray on a large deal table.

‘This way, Monsieur. Dinner is served,’ said the maid, squeezing past him in the doorway.

In the dining room the family were already seated. Madame Azaire stood up.

‘Ah, Monsieur, your seat is here.’

Azaire muttered an introduction of which Stephen heard only the words ‘my wife’. He took her hand and bowed his head briefly. Two children were staring at him from the other side of the table.

‘Lisette,’ Madame Azaire said, gesturing to a girl of perhaps sixteen with dark hair in a ribbon, who smirked and held out her hand, ‘and Grégoire.’ This was a boy of about ten, whose small head was barely visible above the table, beneath which he was swinging his legs vigorously backwards and forwards.

The maid hovered at Stephen’s shoulder with a tureen of soup. Stephen lowered a ladleful of it into his plate and smelt the scent of some unfamiliar herb. Beneath the concentric rings of swirling green the soup was thickened with potato.

Azaire had already finished his and sat rapping his knife in a persistent rhythm against its silver rest. Stephen lifted searching eyes above the soup spoon as he sucked the liquid over his teeth.

‘How old are you?’ said the boy.

‘Grégoire!’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Stephen to Madame Azaire. ‘Twenty.’

‘Do you drink wine?’ said Azaire, holding a bottle over Stephen’s glass.

‘Thank you.’

Azaire poured out an inch or two for Stephen and for his wife before returning the bottle to its place.

‘So what do you know about textiles?’ said Azaire. He was only forty years old but could have been ten years more. His body was of a kind that would neither harden nor sag with age. His eyes had an alert, humourless glare.

‘A little,’ said Stephen. ‘I have worked in the business for nearly four years, though mostly dealing with financial matters. My employer wanted me to understand more of the manufacturing process.’

The maid took away the soup plates and Azaire began to talk about the local industries and the difficulties he had had with his work force. He owned a factory in town and another a few miles outside.

‘The organization of the men into their syndicates leaves me very little room for manoeuvre. They complain they are losing their jobs because we have introduced machinery, but if we cannot compete with our competitors in Spain and England, then we have no hope.’

The maid brought in a dish of sliced meat in thin gravy which she placed in front of Madame Azaire. Lisette began to tell a story of her day at school. She tossed her head and giggled as she spoke. The story concerned a prank played by one girl on another, but Lisette’s telling of it contained a second level. It was as though she recognized the childish nature of what she said and wanted to intimate to Stephen and her parents that she herself was too grown-up for such things. But where her own interests and tastes now lay she seemed unsure; she stammered a little before tailing off and turning to rebuke her brother for his laughter.

Stephen watched her as she spoke, his dark eyes scrutinizing her face. Azaire ignored his daughter as he helped himself to salad and passed the bowl to his wife. He ran a piece of bread round the rim of the plate where traces of the gravy remained.

Madame Azaire had not fully engaged Stephen’s eye. In return he avoided hers, as though waiting to be addressed, but within his peripheral view fell the sweep of her strawberry-

chestnut hair, caught and held up off her face. She wore a white lace blouse with a dark red stone at the throat.

As they finished dinner there was a ring at the front door and they heard a hearty male voice in the hall.

Azaire smiled for the first time. 'Good old Bérard. On the dot as usual!'

'Monsieur and Madame Bérard,' said the maid as she opened the door.

'Good evening to you, Azaire. Madame, delighted.' Bérard, a heavily set grey-haired man in his fifties, lowered his lips to Madame Azaire's hand. His wife, almost equally well built, though with thick hair wound up on top of her head, shook hands and kissed the children on the cheek.

'I am sorry, I didn't hear your name when René introduced us,' said Bérard to Stephen.

While Stephen repeated it and spelled it out for him, the children were dismissed and the Bérards installed in their place.

Azaire seemed rejuvenated by their arrival. 'Brandy for you, Bérard? And for you, Madame, a little tisane, I think? Isabelle, ring for coffee also, please. Now then -'

'Before you go any further,' said Bérard, holding up his fleshy hand, 'I have some bad news. The dyers have called for a strike to begin tomorrow. The syndicate chiefs met the employers' representatives at five this evening and that is their decision.'

Azaire snorted. 'I thought the meeting was tomorrow.'

'It was brought forward to today. I don't like to bring you bad tidings, my dear René, but you would not have thanked me if you had learned it from your foreman tomorrow. At least I suppose it won't affect your factory immediately.'

Bérard in fact appeared to have enjoyed delivering the news. His face expressed a quiet satisfaction at the importance it had conferred on him. Madame Bérard looked admiringly at her husband.

Azaire continued to curse the work force and to ask how they expected him to keep his factories going. Stephen and the women were reluctant to give an opinion and Bérard, having delivered the news, seemed to have no further contribution to make on the subject.

‘So,’ he said, when Azaire had run on long enough, ‘a strike of dyers. There it is, there it is.’

This conclusion was taken by all, including Azaire, as the termination of the subject.

‘How did you travel?’ said Bérard.

‘By train,’ said Stephen, assuming he was being addressed. ‘It was a long journey.’

‘Ah, the trains,’ said Bérard. ‘What a system! We are a great junction here. Trains to Paris, to Lille, to Boulogne . . . Tell me, do you have trains in England?’

‘Yes.’

‘Since when?’

‘Let me see . . . For about seventy years.’

‘But you have problems in England, I think.’

‘I’m not sure. I wasn’t aware of any.’

Bérard smiled happily as he drank his brandy. ‘So there it is. They have trains now in England.’

The course of the conversation depended on Bérard; he took it as his burden to act as a conductor, to bring in the different voices, and then summarize what they had contributed.

‘And in England you eat meat for breakfast every day,’ he said.

‘I think most people do,’ said Stephen.

‘Imagine, dear Madame Azaire, roast meat for breakfast every day!’ Bérard invited his hostess to speak.

She declined, but murmured something about the need to open a window.

‘Perhaps one day we shall do the same, eh, René?’

‘Oh, I doubt it, I doubt it,’ said Azaire. ‘Unless one day we have the London fog as well.’

‘Oh, and the rain,’ laughed Bérard. ‘It rains five days out of six in London, I believe.’ He looked towards Stephen again.

‘I read in a newspaper that last year it rained a little less in London than in Paris, though –’

‘Five days out of six,’ beamed Bérard. ‘Can you imagine?’

‘Papa can’t stand the rain,’ Madame Bérard told Stephen.

‘And how have you passed this beautiful spring day, dear Madame?’ said Bérard, again inviting a contribution from his hostess. This time he was successful, and Madame Azaire, out

of politeness or enthusiasm, addressed him directly.

‘This morning I was out doing some errands in the town. There was a window open in a house near the cathedral and someone was playing the piano.’ Madame Azaire’s voice was cool and low. She spent some time describing what she had heard. ‘It was a beautiful thing,’ she concluded, ‘though just a few notes. I wanted to stop and knock on the door of the house and ask whoever was playing it what it was called.’

Monsieur and Madame Bérard looked startled. It was evidently not the kind of thing they had expected. Azaire spoke with the soothing voice of one used to such fancies. ‘And what was the tune, my dear?’

‘I don’t know. I had never heard it before. It was just a tune like . . . Beethoven or Chopin.’

‘I doubt it was Beethoven if you failed to recognize it, Madame,’ said Bérard gallantly. ‘It was one of those folk songs, I’ll bet you anything.’

‘It didn’t sound like that,’ said Madame Azaire.

‘I can’t bear these folk tunes you hear so much of these days,’ Bérard continued. ‘When I was a young man it was different. Of course, everything was different then.’ He laughed with wry self-recognition. ‘But give me a proper melody that’s been written by one of our great composers any day. A song by Schubert or a nocturne by Chopin, something that will make the hairs of your head stand on end! The function of music is to liberate in the soul those feelings which normally we keep locked up in the heart. The great composers of the past were able to do this, but the musicians of today are satisfied with four notes in a line you can sell on a song-sheet at the street corner. Genius does not find its recognition quite as easily as that, my dear Madame Azaire!’

Stephen watched as Madame Azaire turned her head slowly so that her eyes met those of Bérard. He saw them open wider as they focused on his smiling face on which small drops of perspiration stood out in the still air of the dining room. How on earth, he wondered, could she be the mother of the girl and boy who had been with them at dinner?

‘I do think I should open that window,’ she said coldly, and stood up with a rustle of silk skirt.

‘And you too are a musical man, Azaire?’ said Bérard. ‘It’s a good thing to have music in a household where there are children. Madame Bérard and I always encouraged our children in their singing.’

Stephen’s mind was racing as Bérard’s voice went on and on. There was something magnificent about the way Madame Azaire turned this absurd man aside. He was only a small-town bully, it was true, but he was clearly used to having his own way.

‘I have enjoyed evenings at the concert hall,’ said Azaire modestly, ‘though I should hesitate to describe myself as a “musical man” on account of that. I merely –’

‘Nonsense. Music is a democratic form of art. You don’t need money to buy it or education to study it. All you need is a pair of these.’ Bérard took hold of his large pink ears and shook them. ‘Ears. The gift of God at birth. You must not be shy about your preference, Azaire. That can only lead to the triumph of inferior taste through the failing of false modesty.’ Bérard sat back in his chair and glanced towards the now open window. The draught seemed to spoil his enjoyment of the epigram he had pretended to invent. ‘But forgive me, René,’ he said. ‘I cut you off.’

Azairé was working at his black briar pipe, tamping down the tobacco with his fingers and testing its draw by sucking noisily on it. When it was done to his satisfaction he struck a match and for a moment a blue spiral of smoke encircled his bald head. In the silence before he could reply to his friend, they heard the birds in the garden outside.

‘Patriotic songs,’ said Azairé. ‘I have a particular fondness for them. The sound of bands playing and a thousand voices lifted together to sing the Marseillaise as the army went off to fight the Prussians. What a day that must have been!’

‘But if you’ll forgive me,’ said Bérard, ‘that is an example of music being used for a purpose – to instil a fighting valour in the hearts of our soldiers. When any art is put to practical ends it loses its essential purity. Am I not right, Madame Azairé?’

‘I daresay you are, Monsieur. What does Monsieur Wrayford think?’



Stephen, momentarily startled, look at Madame Azaire and found her eyes on his for the first time. 'I have no view on that, Madame,' he said, recovering his composure. 'But I think if any song can touch the heart, then one should value it.'

Bérard suddenly held out his hand. 'A little brandy, if you please, Azaire. Thank you. Now then. I am going to do something in which I risk playing the fool and making you think ill of me.'

Madame Bérard laughed incredulously.

'I am going to sing. Yes, there's no point in trying to dissuade me. I am going to sing a little song that was popular when I was a boy, and that, I can assure you, was very many years ago.'

It was the speed with which, having made his declaration, Bérard launched into his song that surprised his listeners. One moment they had been making formal after-dinner conversation, the next they had been turned into a trapped audience as Bérard leant forward in his chair, elbows on the table, and sang in a warbling baritone.

He fixed his eyes on Madame Azaire, who was sitting opposite. She was unable to hold his gaze, but looked down at her plate. Her discomfort did not deflect Bérard. Azaire was fiddling with his pipe and Stephen studied the wall above Bérard's head. Madame Bérard watched with a proud smile as her husband made the gift of his song to his hostess. Madame Azaire blushed and squirmed in her chair under the unblinking stare of the singer.

The dewlaps on his neck wobbled as he turned his head for emphasis at a touching part of the song. It was a sentimental ballad about the different times of a man's life. Its chorus ran, 'But then I was young and the leaves were green/Now the corn is cut and the little boat sailed away.'

At the end of each refrain Bérard would pause dramatically and Stephen would allow his eyes a quick glance to see if he had finished. For a moment there was utter silence in the hot dining room, but then would come another deep inhalation and a further verse.

"One day the young men came back from the war,  
The corn was high and our sweethearts were waiting . . ."

Bérard's head revolved a little as he sang, and his voice grew louder as he warmed to the song, but his bloodshot eyes remained fixed on Madame Azaire, as though his head could turn only on the axis of his stare. By an effort of will she appeared to compose herself and stiffen her body against the intimacy of his attention.

"... and the little boat sailed away-y-y." There,' said Bérard, coming abruptly to an end, 'I told you I should make a fool of myself!'

The others all protested that, on the contrary, the song had been magnificent.

'Papa has a beautiful voice,' said Madam Bérard, flushed with pride.

Madame Azaire's face was also pink, though not from the same emotion. Azaire became falsely jovial and Stephen felt a drop of sweat run down inside the back of his collar. Only Bérard himself was completely unembarrassed.

'Now, Azaire, what about a game of cards? What shall it be?'

'Excuse me, René,' said Madame Azaire, 'I have a slight headache. I think I shall go to bed. Perhaps Monsieur Wraysford would like to take my place.'

Stephen stood up as Madame Azaire rose from her chair. There were protests and anxious enquiries from the Bérards which Madame Azaire waved away with a smile, assuring them she was perfectly all right. Bérard lowered his face to her hand and Madame Bérard kissed the still-pink skin of Madame Azaire's cheek. There were a few freckles on her bare forearm, Stephen noticed as she turned to the door, a tall, suddenly commanding figure in a blood-red skirt that swept over the floor of the hall.

'Let's go into the sitting room,' said Azaire. 'Monsieur, I trust you will join us to make up our card game.'

'Yes, of course,' said Stephen, forcing a smile of acquiescence.

'Poor Madame Azaire,' said Madame Bérard, as they settled at the card table. 'I hope she hasn't caught a chill.'

Azaire laughed. 'No, no. It's just her nerves. Think nothing of it.'

‘Such a delicate creature,’ murmured Bérard. ‘Your deal, I think, Azaire.’

‘Nevertheless, a headache can mean the beginning of a fever,’ said Madame Bérard.

‘Madame,’ said Azaire, ‘I assure you that Isabelle has no fever. She is a woman of nervous temperament. She suffers from headaches and various minor maladies. It signifies nothing. Believe me, I know her very well and I have learned how to live with her little ways.’ He gave a glance of complicity towards Bérard, who chuckled. ‘You yourself are fortunate in having a robust constitution.’

‘Has she always suffered from headaches?’ Madame Bérard was persistent.

Azaire’s lips stretched into a narrow smile. ‘It is a small price one pays. It is you to play, Monsieur.’

‘What?’ Stephen looked down at his cards. ‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t concentrating.’ He had been watching Azaire’s smile and wondering what it meant.

Bérard talked to Azaire about the strike as they laid down their cards on the table with swift assurance.

Stephen tried to concentrate on the game and to engage Madame Bérard in some sort of conversation. She seemed indifferent to his attention, though her face lit up whenever her husband addressed her.

‘What these strikers need,’ said Azaire, ‘is for someone to call their bluff. I’m not prepared to see my business stagnate because of the gross demands of a few idle men. Some owner has to have the strength to stand up to them and sack the whole lot.’

‘I fear there would be violence. The mobs would rampage,’ said Bérard.

‘Not without food in their stomachs.’

‘I’m not sure it would be wise for a town councillor like yourself, René, to be involved in such a dispute.’

Bérard took up the pack to shuffle it; his thick fingers moved dextrously over the rippling cards. When he had dealt, he lit a cigar and sat back in his chair, pulling his waistcoat smartly down over his belly.

The maid came in to ask if there was anything further.

Stephen stifled a yawn. He had been travelling since the previous day and was drawn to the idea of his modest room with the starched sheets and the view across the boulevard.

‘No, thank you,’ said Azaire. ‘Please go to Madame Azaire’s room on your way to bed and tell her I shall look in to see if she’s all right later.’

For a moment Stephen thought he had seen another half-glance of complicity between the two men, but when he looked at Bérard his face was absorbed in the cards that were fanned out in his hand.

Stephen said goodbye to the visitors when they finally got up to leave. He stood at the window of the sitting room, watching them in the light of the porch. Bérard put on a top hat as though he were some baron on his way home from the opera; Madame Bérard, her face glowing, wrapped her cape round her and took his arm. Azaire leaned forward from the waist and talked in what looked like an urgent whisper.

A soft rain had begun to fall outside, loosening the earth at the sides of the rutted tracks on the road and sounding the leaves on the plane trees. It gave a greasy film to the window of the sitting room and then formed larger drops which began to run down the glass. Behind it Stephen’s pale face was visible as he watched the departing guests – a tall figure with hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes patient and intent, the angle of his body that of a youthful indifference cultivated by willpower and necessity. It was a face which in turn most people treated cautiously, unsure whether its ambivalent expressions would resolve themselves into passion or acquiescence.

Up in his room Stephen listened to the noises of the night. A loose shutter turned slowly on its hinges and banged against the wall at the back of the house. There was an owl somewhere deep in the gardens, where the cultivation gave way to wildness. There was also the irregular wheeze and rush of the plumbing in its narrow pipes.

Stephen sat down at the writing table by the window and opened a notebook with pages ruled in thick blue lines. It was half-full with inky writing that spread over the lines in clusters that erupted from the red margin on the left. There were

dates at intervals in the text, though there were gaps of days and sometimes weeks between them.

He had kept a notebook for five years, since a master at the grammar school had suggested it. The hours of Greek and Latin study had given him an unwanted but ingrained knowledge of the languages that he used as the basis of a code. When the subject matter was sensitive, he would change the sex of the characters and note their actions or his responses with phrases that could not mean anything to a chance reader.

He laughed softly to himself as he wrote. This sense of secrecy was something he had had to cultivate in order to overcome a natural openness and a quick temper. At the age of ten or eleven his artless enthusiasm and outraged sense of right and wrong had made him the despair of his teachers, but he had slowly learned to breathe and keep calm, not to trust his responses, but to wait and be watchful.

His cuffs loosened, he held his face in his hands and looked at the blank wall ahead of him. There came a noise that this time was not the shutter or the sound of water but something shriller and more human. It came again, and Stephen crossed the room to listen for it. He opened the door on to the landing and stepped out gently, remembering the sound his feet had made before. The noise was of a woman's voice, he was almost sure, and it was coming from the floor below.

He took off his shoes, slid them quietly over the threshold of his room and began to creep down the stairs. It was completely dark in the house; Azaire must have turned off all the lights on his way to bed. Stephen felt the spring of the wooden treads beneath his socks and the line of the banister under his exploring hand. He had no fear.

On the first-floor landing he hesitated. The size of the house and the number of possible directions from which the noise could have come became dauntingly clear. Three passageways opened from the landing, one of them up a small step leading towards the front of the house and two going sideways along the length of it before breaking up into further corridors. A whole family and its servants, to say nothing of bathrooms, laundries or stores, was on this floor. He could wander by

chance into a cook's bedroom or an upstairs salon with Chinese ornaments and Louis XVI silks.

He listened intently, stifling his own breath for a moment. There was a different sound now, not identifiably a woman's voice, but a lower note, almost like sobbing, interrupted by a more material sound of brief impact. Stephen wondered if he should continue. He had left his room impulsively in the belief that something was wrong; now it seemed to him he might merely be trespassing on the privacy of some member of the household. But he did not falter long because he knew that the noise was not a normal one.

He took a passageway to the right, walking with exaggerated care, one arm in front of him to protect his eyes from harm, and one feeling along the wall. The passageway came to a junction, and looking leftwards Stephen saw a narrow bar of light coming from beneath a closed door. He calculated how close to the door he should go. He wanted to remain sufficiently near to the turn in the corridor that he would have time to double back into it and out of sight of anyone emerging from the room.

He went to within half a dozen paces, which was as close as he dared. He stopped and listened, again quelling his own breathing so he would not miss a sound. He could feel the swell of his heart against his chest and a light pulse in the flesh of his neck.

He heard a woman's voice, cool and low, though made intense by desperation. She was pleading, and the words, though indistinct because of the way she kept her voice down, were made audible in places by the urgency of the feeling behind them. Stephen could distinguish the word 'René', and later 'I implore you', and then 'children'. The voice, which he recognized even on this slight evidence as Madame Azaire's, was cut short by the thudding sound he had heard before. It turned to a gasp which, because of its sudden move into a higher register, was clearly one of pain.

Stephen moved forward along the corridor, his hands no longer raised cautiously in front of him but tensed into fists by his ribs. A step or two short of the door he managed to control his sense of confused anger. For the first time he heard a

man's voice. It was repeating a single word in a broken, unconvinced tone that gave way to a sob. Then there were footsteps.

Stephen turned and ran for the cover of the passageway, knowing he had advanced beyond the limit he had set himself. As he turned the corner he heard Azaire's quizzical voice. 'Is there anyone there?' He tried to remember whether there had been any hazards on his way as he ran back towards the landing without time to check that his path was clear. From the foot of the stairs going up to the second floor he could see that some light was coming from his room. He took the steps two at a time and plunged towards the switch on the table lamp, causing it to rock and bang as he reached it.

He stood still in the middle of the room, listening. He could hear footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs below. If Azaire came up he would wonder why he was standing fully dressed in the middle of a dark room. He moved to the bed and slid under the covers.

After ten minutes he thought it safe to undress for bed. He closed the door and the shutter on the small window and sat down in his nightclothes at the writing table. He read over the entry he had written earlier, which described his journey from London, the train in France and the arrival in the boulevard du Cange. It made brief comments on the character of Bérard and his wife, under heavy disguise, and gave his impressions of Azaire and the two children. He saw, with some surprise, that what had struck him most he had not written about at all.